

Invitation

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The sight of his tears led to an embrace, the embrace led to an invitation, and an invitation can lead anywhere. Shika X Tem. My first story, please enjoy.

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An invitation

They were all going to be all right. Choji, Kiba, Neji, Naruto, and Lee were all going to recover. He didn't give a damn about Sasuke, that damned traitor, or about the fact his first mission had been a failure. His friends were all going to recover. The tears came as all the stress and fear of the last 48 hours came crashing down on him. He didn't give a damn about those either or about his stupid reputation.

"Next time I will carry out the mission perfectly." He choked out the words, a solemn promise to himself.

As more tears came he felt two gentle hands on his shoulders. He looked up to see a pair of green eyes, they were wet as well. He looked into her eyes and all he could see was caring and warmth. Without a word he was pulled into a soft embrace and found himself sobbing onto her shoulder.

"I tried..." No more words would come.

He felt one hand tenderly caressing the back of his neck and a gentle voice whispering in his ear that it was all right, that everything was all right.

He didn't know how long they stayed that way. It seemed like hours to him. No one interrupted them. She didn't tell him to stop or push him away. For however long it was she stayed there comforting him. When the tears finally stopped, and he felt himself to be in control again, he carefully pulled away from her warmth. He stood there and looked at this girl who had seemed so terrible and frightening to him not so long ago. She didn't mock him or tell him he needed to be stronger. She just smiled at him and carefully wiped his cheeks. Was this really the same girl who had been talking about emotional training and inevitable losses just a little while ago?

He jumped as he heard a cough coming from behind him. He turned around to see his father standing there about 15 feet away. The Hokage and Shizune were long gone and there was no one else. His father's expression was absolutely blank as he spoke. "Shika, Neji and Choji are still in intensive care but Kiba and Naruto are both on the fourth floor and taking visitors. As team leader you should go see them."

Shikamaru nodded, he did need to see them. The mission was over but his responsibility to his teammates and friends was not. He turned back to the girl. "I have to go."

She nodded. "I understand I should go find my brothers."

"Would you have dinner with me and my family tonight?"

She was obviously stunned by the sudden invitation, but after a slight hesitation said, "I would love to."

That had been yesterday. Now he was on his favorite hilltop looking at the clouds float peacefully above. He wanted to find some normalcy again. He needed to somehow assimilate everything that had happened to him in just three days. All he wanted was some uninterrupted peace and quiet.

"Oi, lazy, I thought I could find you here!"

Shikamaru sat up and stared at the blonde walking up the hill towards him. She was dressed in her usual outfit and had her fan strapped across her back. What caught his eye though was what looked suspiciously like a picnic basket "How did you know where to find me?"

Without any invitation she dropped down next to him and opened the basket. "Well when I went to your house your mother told me that you liked to come here a lot." She pulled out a large cloth and spread it out on the grass.

A sudden stab of fear went through him. He was already certain that this could not be good. "Wait a second *why* were you at my home?"

She quirked an eyebrow at him and gave him one of her annoying little grins. "I wanted to thank your mother again for that lovely dinner. My brothers and I really appreciated it." *I was also looking for you silly boy.* "Your dad was out working but your mother was kind enough to invite me in and we got to talking." She began taking out wrapped plates and setting them out on the cloth.

There was another stab of fear. "And just what were the two of you talking about?" Shikamaru made the decision then and there that if any baby pictures had been involved he was moving in with the Akimichis.

"Oh, this and that, you know, girl talk." She loved seeing him panicked. She considered mentioning the photo album to him, but decided to save that for another day.

"What are you doing?"

"What?" She answered with mock innocence as she set out the last plate of food.

"This," he waved at the small feast she had set out in front of them.

"Oh!" She blinked as though caught completely off guard. "Well your mother mentioned to me that you didn't have breakfast this morning and she asked me if I would be willing to bring you a little snack. After all her courtesy I couldn't very well say, 'no,' now could I?"

"Interesting how you manage to be so polite around my folks."

She gave him one of her big smiles. Right before she smacked the back of his head... hard.

"Ow!"

She pulled out two glasses and a thermos. "I am always polite... to people who deserve it." She answered pointedly before handing him a glass of tea. She took out a pair of chop sticks and handed those over to him as well. "If you are ready we can go ahead and have lunch. It's almost noon so I know you must be hungry."

He was just about to tell her he was not hungry and to leave him alone when his stomach betrayed him with a low growl. Temari laughed at him. He glared at her, but that only made her laugh even harder. He took a look at all the food and couldn't deny it looked and smelled wonderful. And it wasn't like he could pretend he wasn't hungry. He sighed and admitted defeat. "Troublesome," he muttered as he began to load down a plate with food.

As they ate he was surprised to find himself really enjoying their meal together. Their conversation was light and playful as they both steered clear of painful subjects. They compared their villages and the differences between living in a desert and forest region. They talked about the values and uses of different jutsus. They talked about friends and people they knew. They talked about every day normal things. It was a very pleasant meal.

That of course, meant it was the polar opposite of the dinner they had had the previous night. When Shikamaru had invited her to his family's home for dinner it had been done completely on impulse. He hadn't thought about it before issuing the invitation. She had accepted immediately, but had then later informed him that she could not come without her brothers. He had thought she had just changed her mind and was using her brothers as an excuse. She had insisted that she really wanted to come but that Suna culture was simply more traditional than Konoha's and that her brothers would be insulted if she went without them. Then his dad had spoken up and told Temari to bring her brothers, that they would be welcomed.

Shikamaru would not have invited them. True they were allies now. True without their help Kiba and Lee would have surely died, just as he would have without Temari's. But that did not change the fact that he did not trust or like either of them. He considered Kankuro nothing

but a loudmouth bully who liked playing with dolls and wearing make up. As for Gaara... he did not think he would **ever** get over what he had done to Lee in the exams and what he had wanted to do in the hospital. Though Gaara was supposedly much more humane and less, well, psychotic since their last meeting he had still felt very nervous at the sight of him at their door. He had quietly taken him aside and told him in no uncertain terms what would happen if even a single grain of sand left his gourd. Gaara had taken his words surprisingly well and even assured him that he did not ever use sand during social events. The dinner itself had actually gone well with all three siblings on their absolute best behavior. After dinner was a different matter.

With the meal over Temari had volunteered to help his mom and dad with the dishes. And somehow the three boys had all wound up sitting very close together on the living room sofa. The two brothers then began asking him a series of questions about what he thought of their sister and about his plans for the future. It had felt like an interrogation and he had gotten the very distinct impression that if he had tried to leave or answered a question wrong that Gaara's sand just might make an appearance after all. He didn't understand what the big deal was. It was just a dinner, right? When Temari had returned from the kitchen he was suddenly the only one on the couch as the three of them were in a small huddle having a very quiet talk. He wasn't sure what the hell had just happened but he was sure *something* had. Both her brothers kissed her on the cheek and he thought he might have heard the words, 'blessing' and 'idiot.' When his parents came out of the kitchen the two brothers quickly thanked them and left.

Of course after that came the best part of the evening, he got to watch as his mom asked her a few questions. Shikamaru had so enjoyed watching the over confident blonde girl answering questions about her personal life and her thoughts on him. He knew from experience what it was like to have his mother's undivided attention and just what it could do to someone. His opinion of Temari went up a couple of notches seeing how well she stood up to it. I mean

fighting a crazed flute girl with a curse seal was one thing, but his mother was actually scary.

"You seem to really like the chicken." Temari commented as he helped himself to a third serving.

"Yeah, my mom doesn't usually make it this spicy but it's really good."

"Thank you."

"Huh?"

"I made it." She said, clearly pleased with herself.

He stared at her. "Really?"

Her mood instantly soured. "What do you mean, really? I'll have you know I have cooked for my family since I was eight. I am as skilled in the kitchen as I am on the battlefield."

He held up his hands defensively. "I'm sorry I am just so used to thinking of you as a fierce kunoichi I have trouble picturing you in an apron."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Being one doesn't mean I'm any less of a woman. I'll have you know I am a master of all the feminine arts."

Shikamaru quirked an eyebrow. " *All* of them?" She blushed and looked away. Seeing that made Shikamaru feel strangely pleased with himself. "So my mom let you cook in her kitchen?"

Temari nodded as she took a sip of tea. "Yes, your mother asked me if I wanted to make anything for you and she let me."

"Now that is really troublesome." He took another bite of the chicken.

"How is my cooking troublesome?" She set her glass down and began reaching for her fan.

Not wanting to be hit by a 70 pound fan he answered quickly. "It's just that she must really like you. When it comes to making food in the kitchen she's like a wolf guarding her territory. She won't even let me or dad make a sandwich when she's home."

Temari considered this... and then hit him over the head with her fan. "Ow! That hurt! Crazy woman, what the hell was that for?"

She set her fan down. "You should be glad your mother likes me."

He rubbed the top of his head. He was sure there would be a bump there later. His mom, Ino, Temari, what horrible sin had he committed in some past life to cause him to be cursed with all these troublesome women? "I should have known she would, you're two of a kind."

"Just what does that mean?" He saw her reaching for her fan again.

Fearing a return to the hospital (or worse) he answered. "I just mean you're both really strong women who don't know when to leave me alone."

This answer actually seemed to mollify her. "You should be glad Nara Shikamaru to have strong women in your life. You need us to keep you motivated or you wouldn't ever accomplish anything! I swear I've never met anyone even half as lazy as you."

He laughed at her. "I'm sorry did you not meet my dad yesterday? He has to be at least 90 as lazy as I am."

"And I'll bet he would never have made Jonin without his wife there to keep him on track and focused. You should take a lesson from that lazy. You're going to need a wife who won't let you just sleep all day."

"Got anyone in mind for the job?"

She blushed again but managed to not look away. "I'm sure you'll find *someone* who is willing to put with you."

He shook his shoulders. "Too bad it can't be you Temari."

" **WHAT!**" She looked at him in complete shock.

"I have already decided that whoever I marry is not going to be too beautiful or too ugly. So I can't marry you since you're much too beautiful." He told her simply.

Once again the boy had managed to leave her completely confused. It was disconcerting how often he did that to her. She was honestly not sure whether to be offended at being told he would not even consider her as a wife, or be pleased at his calling her beautiful.

"I also want her to be my age or a little younger so I'm afraid you're too old."

Well that settled things.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" Shikamaru ducked and covered his head as an absolutely furious Temari stood over him with a raised fan and murder in her eyes.

"How dare you! I am Sabaku no Temari daughter of the Fourth Kazekage, first daughter of the most noble house in Suna, the wind mistress of the desert, I have dozens of royal suitors including the eldest son and next Daimyo of wind country, and I am also the woman who saved **your miserable ass just two days ago!**" She screamed at him. "You should be down on your knees thanking me that I would even consider letting you court me!"

"So you want me to court you?" He looked up at her from beneath his arms.

" Yes you idiot! Why do you think I asked my brothers for their permission?"

Shikamaru lowered his arms and smiled at her. "All right."

"Huh?" She felt her anger leach away to be replaced, yet again, by confusion.

He rolled his eyes at her. "I said all right, I will make an exception and consider you as a potential wife, even if you are too beautiful and too old." He said as if he was granting her a very large favor.

Temari felt her jaw tighten along with her grip on the fan. As she continued to stand over the now relaxed boy she actually considered whether or not Tsunade would declare war if she beat Shikamaru into a bloody pulp. As a woman Tsunade just might understand that some men were simply too annoying to let live. Ultimately she decided that however satisfying it might be she owed it both Konoha and Suna not to risk a war. Instead she sat back down and finished her meal.

The two of them ate in a semi-comfortable silence. She did not fail to notice the self satisfied grin he had. Why did she have the feeling that he had somehow maneuvered her into saying what she had? Everything she had told him was true. Back home there was an actual list with no less than 43 names on it of official suitors. They ranged from foreign nobles to elite Suna Jonin to wealthy merchants; and every last one of them had sought *her* out. Of course she understood that most of them had no interest in her as a person. The vast majority on that list had never even met her and might not have ever even seen a picture of her. Their interest in her was for the political connection her name offered or perhaps for the 5 million ryu dowry that came along with her. But there were plenty of names not on the list of handsome young men who admired her. She had received literally hundreds of flowers, chocolates, and love notes from admirers. These she always received with real appreciation, but it never went further than that. She was too busy with training and watching out for her brothers to have time for romance. But more

than that no one had ever really caught her eye. She was 16 but she had never had a boyfriend or a real kiss.

She looked at the boy sitting across from her. *Why are you special to me?* He was a Konoha Chunin and heir to one of its stronger clans. Despite his world weary attitudes he was all of 13 and as she had seen was still learning about life. He was supposedly a genius (though she still had her doubts) and was undeniably a talented shinobi. He was brave and devoted to his friends and village. And of course he was cute, especially when he had that little smirk of his. There was also the little matter that he was the only one to ever beat her down in a fight. *Is that what it is? That he beat me once? If we had a rematch I would so kick his ass.* But that wasn't the reason. She honestly didn't know why she cared about him. She only knew that she did. In her entire life there had only been five people she had truly cared for, and two of them were gone; her brothers, Baki-sensei, her uncle Yashamaru, and her mom. No one else had ever been allowed into her heart, not even her bastard of a father. But now there was a sixth name engraved on her heart. When she had seen him cry in the hospital she had ached for him. She had known then and there that she would give anything to take away his pain. That was when she realized that her infatuation had become something much more serious.

"Why are you staring at me?" He asked as he collected the plates and handed them to her.

"I am trying to decide whether or not I should hit you again." She took the plates and put them back in the basket. He shook a finger at her.

"If you do that troublesome woman you'll never get the marriage of your dreams."

"Oh? Do you really think the Daimyo's son would refuse me just for that?"

"Have you ever cooked for the Daimyo's son?" He said a bit too smugly.

She gave him a huge smile. "Yes actually, he has visited Suna many times and my father always had me prepare the meal when they ate together. He and I have talked several times and he is quite infatuated with me, he likes to call me his, 'little desert blossom.'" She decided to leave out the part about him being about 300 pounds and having all the charm and intelligence of a pig in heat. She thought she saw just a little worry on Shikamaru's face.

"It occurs to me that before I could seriously consider choosing a wife I should make sure she really can cook more than just one dish. I don't suppose there's anyway I could get you to make an entire meal?"

"Well I wouldn't want you to go hungry so I just *might* be willing to do that. But not in your mother's kitchen."

He looked at her in genuine surprise. "Well where then?"

She finished folding up the cloth and stuffed it back into the basket. "If I make dinner for you it will be in *my* kitchen."

"You're inviting me to Suna?" That couldn't be what she meant. It was.

"Of course," she looked at him as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I don't know how things are in Konoha but in Suna we take hospitality *very* seriously. You invited me into your home; it would be the height of rudeness for me not to invite you into mine."

"Your brothers..."

"Follow the same traditions I do. I promise you they would have no problem with you paying me a visit."

Shikamaru took a deep breath. "It's not that simple. I'm a shinobi of the Leaf. I can't leave the village without the Hokage's permission."

She stood up and so did he. "I understand that. But my brothers and I are leaving tomorrow morning and I don't know when I'll be back." She looked him in the eye and tried to sound as serious as she could. "If you really want to get to know me you can't just depend on me coming here. I am shinobi as well. Look, you have the invitation and there's no time limit on it. You can decide what you want to do with it. Now I have to return this to your mother. Thanks for a very interesting lunch." She turned and began to walk *slowly* down the hill.

Shikamaru fell into step beside her and tried to take the basket. She deftly moved it to her other hand and away from him. "Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?"

"Well nothing that couldn't be changed if I had something better to do."

"Have you ever played Shogi?"

She nodded and smiled at him. "That's what you want to do?"

"It's a lot of fun and I am hoping we can have a good game."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Fine, but I have to warn you I am pretty good and I won't go easy on you."

"Of course, there's no point unless you're trying as hard as you can to attain your goal." He reached out and gently took her hand into his. She blushed and looked at him, but did not try to pull away. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Even if it takes awhile and it's not always easy."

She smiled at this lazy underage ninja and decided it was a good thing she had not beaten him to a bloody pulp. "I couldn't agree with you more."

A promise, an explanation, and a bet

Author's Note: Thanks for all the positive feedback. I've decided to go ahead and continue this story as a few people have asked me to. Feel free to read and review and please enjoy.

It was early morning and the three of them were headed toward the gate. As they approached there were the two normal sentries on duty. There was also an additional shinobi there, one with a top knot and Chunin vest. The three of them all had different reactions. Temari smiled, Kankuro grimaced, and Gaara looked over to his sister.

"Do not take too long." Was all he said, Kankuro was about to add something, but a look from his brother kept him silent. Without a word the two of them headed to the gate entrance as their sister went over to the young Chunin.

"You're up early." She said, not even trying to hide the pleasure she felt at seeing him one more time before she left.

Shikamaru put a hand over his mouth to cover up his yawn. He was definitely *not* a morning person. "I just thought I would come by and make sure you had no trouble leaving."

"Oh? Were you afraid I wouldn't be able to find my way?"

"It's possible there are a lot of twisting roads here, it's very easy to get lost if you don't know your way around."

She put her hands on her hips and moved closer to him. "I don't suppose it would be that you wanted to see my *beautiful* face again now would it?"

Having her so close he suddenly felt himself getting a bit warmer. "Troublesome woman, I was just trying to be polite and give you a

proper goodbye."

"Really?" She leaned in, putting her face very close to his. "Did you know that in Suna we usually say goodbye to our loved ones with a kiss?"

Her face was all he could see. He could feel her warm breath. He even thought he could feel the warmth of her lips next to his. His mouth suddenly seemed very dry. And for once his mind failed him as he could think of nothing witty to say in return.

Watching him blush she decided to go in for the kill. She put a hand on his shoulder and deliberately let one finger brush his neck as she moved her lips to his ear. "Such a shame we're not love huh Shika?"

He felt a shiver run up and down his spine. How the hell was he supposed to respond to that? He suddenly wished he was a lot older than 13, he didn't know what to do. She might have been waiting for some reaction. When he said nothing, she stood up straight and smiled down at him.

"Well thank you for making sure I found my way, goodbye."

As she turned to leave he blurted out, "So I don't get a kiss?" The instant the words were said he knew he'd been way too loud. Her brothers were both looking at him now; Kankuro looked angry, Gaara had a very slight frown which Shikamaru found far more worrisome. But now even the two Leaf nins were looking at him and laughing. He felt a sickening certainty that *everyone* from the Hokage to Ino to his mom would find out about this. But that thought disappeared as his face was cupped in Temari's hands.

She leaned in close again and spoke in a low throaty voice. "Do you want a kiss?"

His mouth was dry again and his throat tight. All he could manage was to nod his head a bit.

Temari was enjoying this. She looked into his eyes and for a moment, just half a second, considered giving him what he wanted. But instead put one finger softly on his lips. "Come visit me and I promise I will give you a kiss." She then turned and walked away before he could say a word. She rejoined her brothers and the three of them headed out the gate. Just as they were about to go she finally heard him respond.

"Women are troublesome," he declared to the world in general. She looked back over her shoulder to see him smiling at her. "But *some* women are worth the trouble."

She laughed and smiled just for him, and then leapt away with her brothers.

"You were up early this morning." Shikaku noted as he dug into his eggs.

"Hmmm..." Shikamaru moved the food about his plate.

"Shikamaru! Do not be rude to your father!" His mother Yoshino barked out.

He rolled his eyes. "So troublesome," he muttered under his breath.

"Say, didn't that girl have to leave today? Oh, what was her name again?" He remarked casually, with just the touch of a smile.

Shikamaru looked directly at his father. "You're not fooling anyone you know."

"Her name was Temari dear, such a nice smart young girl!" His mom answered ignoring her son's comment. "And so polite and respectful! That is so rare to find in young women these days." Shikamaru wondered if he could make it to the door before his mother hauled him back.

"Oh yes, Temari that was her name. Say, Shika if she's not leaving until later why don't you try and invite her over for lunch?"

He narrowed his eyes at his father. "I know that you know she left a couple hours ago."

Shikaku looked just stunned at the revelation. "Well son just how would I know that you know that I know... you know?" His wife threw a piece of toast at him. "But say weren't you out of the house at that same time?"

"Dad if you want to know something why don't you just come out and ask?"

He smiled, "because my boy slowly torturing you is so much more entertaining." His son sent him a death glare, which alas had no effect.

Yoshino looked at her son. "Did you see her off?" Her son nodded warily. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Shikamaru," she said in a no nonsense tone. "You got up this morning without having me to drag you out of bed for a change just so you could see this girl before she left. Now *something* must have happened. What did you say? What did she say? Did she give you anything?"

Not yet. Shikamaru felt himself blush at his own thought. "Dad I take it back please continue to beat around the bush all you like and avoid direct questions."

Seeing his wife about to continue he jumped in. "Take it easy on him dear. After all it must be hard for him seeing his girlfriend leave."

That word set off a wave of panic and he sat up straight. "She is **not** my girlfriend!" Upon hearing the denial both his parents gave him

identical amused looks.

"If you say so dear," said his mom.

"Does *she* know that?" His dad quipped.

"Look she is definitely not my girlfriend, at best we are simply good friends!"

"Chouji is also a good friend, but I don't believe I've ever seen you walking hand in hand with him." Shikaku said.

"If you had dear we would be having a *very* different conversation right now."

Shikamaru buried his head in his hands. He sent a silent prayer to Kami to allow sweet death to come and take him.

His mom reached over and put a hand on his arm. "It's all right Shika; there is nothing to be ashamed of. You're a normal healthy young boy and you're getting to that age where you are beginning to notice women. Who could blame you for noticing her? Especially with the size of her..."

" **MOM!!**"

His mother glared at him and he shrank back into his seat a bit.

"Don't you dare yell at me! All I am saying is that the way that girl's hips move..." She was interrupted by a sudden pounding at the front door.

Shikamaru put his hands together in prayer. "Oh please Kami let it be the ANBU with a 6 month mission to Snow country!" His mother sent him another angry glare as she got up to answer it.

"You know son you shouldn't joke." Shikaku sipped his tea. "The last time we were interrupted during breakfast it was the ANBU with a mission for you."

Shikamaru nodded hesitantly, all kidding aside there was no way the Hokage would assign him to a new mission so soon, was there?

But it wasn't an ANBU operative who rushed into the kitchen to stand right beside him looking at him with an expression that could only be described as absolute terror. One look at her caused both Nara men to worry. Normally her presence in this house would not be considered unusual. She was even known to occasionally come by early just to share breakfast with them. Her presence did not alarm the men, her appearance did. Her hair was an absolute mess, her face unwashed and dirty, but most shocking of all the girl had simply thrown on a coat and rushed over. The fact that Ino Yamanaka would be willing to be seen in public in a coat and bunny pajamas signaled a major disaster had to be pending.

"Ino! What..." Shikamaru tried to ask.

She stared at him, obviously on the verge of panic. "Shikamaru I just heard the news please tell me it's not true!"

Ice cold fear ran through him. His very first thought was that Chouji was still in intensive care and something had happened. He stood up and put his hands on her shoulders. "Ino calm down! I don't know what you're talking about." By this point his parents were on either side of her also trying to calm her.

She was shaking. "I got a call from Sakura who is at the Hokage's office, she got the information from Tsunade herself, but it has to be a lie! Shikamaru tell me it's a lie!"

He took a deep breath readying himself for the absolute worst. "Ino I don't know what happened what is the news?"

She looked at him in horror. "Sakura told me you had been seen making out with that sand nin right by the main gate, but that's not true is it? You would never do something like *that*."

Both of his parents turned their attention from the girl to him.

"Shikamaru you made out with her in *public* ?" His mom said scandalized.

"Still claim she's not your girlfriend?" His dad put in.

" **GIRLFRIEND!**" Ino exploded.

Shikamaru sat back down and shut his eyes wearily. *This is going to take a very long time to explain.* He opened his eyes and cleared his throat. "All right to begin with..."

Temari could not remember the last time she had been in such a good mood. Quite possibly not since she was a small child, before Gaara had begun killing. The weather was perfect, Gaara was pleased to have talked to Uzumaki again, and of course she had made the boy she cared for beg for a kiss. *I am just too damn good; poor lazy never stood a chance.* She was already thinking about different scenarios of what might happen when Shikamaru came to visit. Because she had no doubt that he *would* be coming to get that kiss. It might take some time; she understood that he would likely visit her as part of a mission to Suna, and those were not common. But she found that she didn't mind, it was sort of nice to have something to look forward to. She also found that it was kind of nice to be able to think about a boy in *that* way.

"So just what the hell was all that about?"

She looked to her left and Kankuro was glowering at her. They were making good time leaping through the trees and were already about five miles from Konoha. "What? Can you really blame the poor boy for wanting a kiss from a beauty such as me?" She knew she sounded smug but didn't care.

"I mean what the hell were **you** doing back there?"

"I was just being nice to him." She said primly.

"Being nice doesn't include being draped all over him like some fan girl!"

She gave her younger brother a sharp look. "Well you would know all about *that* and don't compare me to any of your stupid tramps."

"My fan girls are not tramps!"

"Wrong, any girl who is with you just because of your name or your money is by definition a tramp. Don't even think about butting into my personal life. Do I do that with you?"

He looked at her in outrage. "Yes you do! All the time! You chased my last girlfriend out of our house with a knife!"

"She was in my room!"

"You're always doing stuff like that to get between me and my girlfriends."

She sniffed at him. "Don't insult women everywhere by calling those sluts girlfriends. If you would date a decent girl instead of those mindless bimbos I wouldn't have to keep helping you."

"Helping?! Every time I bring a girl home with me I have to watch out for, 'mysterious gusts,' or the poor girl ends up in a heap." His sister grinned at him. "Pffft whatever, I don't know why I'm even worried about this; it's not like you're ever going to see him again."

She sent him a hooded look. "I've already told you he's going to be visiting us."

"Yeah right," he said dismissively. "He's really going to come all the way to Suna over a little fling."

If they had been standing on the ground she would have beat him until he was unconscious. "It was **not** a fling! Unlike you and your bimbos Shikamaru and I have real feelings for each other."

He laughed at her. "Sure just keep telling yourself that."

"He is going to visit me!"

"Of course he will."

She sent Kankuro a sweet smile; she knew *exactly* how to shut him up. "Care to make a bet? Why don't we wager he comes to see me in the next, oh lets say six months?"

He smiled right back at her. He loved a challenge and he loved bets. "You're on sis, what do you want to bet chores or pride?" Since they were wealthy money had no meaning to them. So the stakes were always household chores or having to perform humiliating acts.

"Oh I definitely think we're going to have to go with pride on this one. In fact this is what I have in mind..."

A little ritual

Two Months Later

"Well Shikamaru I must admit I am highly *pleased* and *satisfied* to find you so... *eager* for this assignment." Tsunade spoke and Shizune tried to stifle a giggle.

Shikamaru let out a sigh. You weren't really supposed to tell the supreme leader of your village she was acting like a school girl. "Thank you Hokage-sama." He reached out to accept the mission document, but the Hokage didn't seem quite ready to hand it over.

"My, my Shikamaru you do seem very *anxious* to receive this assignment." She looked at him with a barely quivering lip. "Any particular reason you requested it?"

He tried not to blush or stutter, why did something so simple have to be so troublesome? "My team and I have not really been out of the village for some time and I thought it might be good to go on a mission that involves a bit of traveling." He tried to sound uninterested.

"Oh! I understand now! You wish to see some new places, eh? Well you happen to be in luck a new mission to River country just came available and it's a B-rank. Now how does that sound?"

Oh wonderful she was going to make him beg! He shut his eyes for a moment. Why did every single woman in his life insist on making it harder? "Thank you Hokage-sama but I think the first mission would be preferable."

"Are you absolutely sure Shikamaru? It is only a C-rank after all and an extended one at that. I was actually thinking of giving it to one of the new rookie teams."

"No! I mean, ah..." Tsunade and Shizune were both openly giggling. "I feel that this mission would be a good transition to allow Chouji to acclimate to more difficult ones."

"Oh, so you're doing this for Chouji? Well it's good of you to show so much concern for your team member." Tsunade said.

"Does he have a girlfriend there as well?" Shizune asked. Both women laughed as Shikamaru could only stand there and feign indifference. When their laughter died down the Hokage mercifully decided to return to business.

"I am sorry Shikamaru; I formally assign you this mission to Suna." She held out the mission briefing and he quickly took it. "The mission should last about three weeks, possibly four. As I've already said it's C-rank so there should be no major complications. You and your team must be prepared to leave by 9 a.m. tomorrow morning. Are there any questions?"

"No Hokage-sama, and thank you again for granting my request."

She had on a mischievous smile. "Have fun in Suna!" She shared a look with her assistant. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Shikamaru told himself that he did not run out of the Hokage's office like a scared girl. He was hurrying through Hokage tower as quick as possible, he had to get his team together and let them know the good news, he would have to let his parents know he would be gone for awhile, he would have to get packed for the trip, and while he was here he would stop by the central posting office and have a message sent out.

They were at the restaurant that had become their unofficial meeting place. As usual they were having a meal together before going out on a long mission. As Shikamaru watched Chouji suck down one piece of beef after another he sighed.

"Chouji you're going to bankrupt me."

His best friend laughed at him. "That's what you get for becoming Chunin. Since Asuma's out of the village right now you're team leader. And team leader always pays for the meal."

"That rule seemed much fairer when Asuma-sensei was always the one paying."

"I cannot believe you want us to actually go to Suna. Do you have any idea what the sun can do to a girl's skin?" Their other teammate said.

"I'll buy you some sun block." Shikamaru said, not sounding the least bit sympathetic.

She glared at the lazy Chunin. "Why did you have to get this now? Sakura is having her birthday next week and I'm going to miss it!"

"Buy her something nice in Suna and give it to her when you get back."

"But I'll miss the party!"

"She'll have another one next year."

The blonde came to a slow boil as each comment only made her angrier. "That's it! I am **not** going on this mission! You and Chouji can go by yourselves!"

"Fine."

The girl waited, but there was nothing else. The table was actually quiet for a change as no one spoke. Chouji looked from one friend to the other. He was by far the most sensitive of the trio and did not like the tension he was feeling. Proof of that was that he actually stopped eating. Shikamaru took advantage to snag a couple prime pieces of meat for himself. Alone among his teammates he continued to eat

and did not seem to mind the silence. The silence dragged on for a couple of minutes as Ino glared at the boy sitting across from her.

Finally she barked out, "That's it?! You're not going to argue with me to come with you?"

He stopped eating and gave her his full attention. "That's right Ino, if going to Sakura's party is more important to you than accompanying your team on a mission to a foreign country then you can stay. This is not an S-rank so you have that right. As the assigned team leader I judge that Chouji and I will be able to accomplish the mission goal so there's really no need for you to come."

The fact that he was just dismissing her like that hurt. "Don't you even **want** me to come?"

"Not if you're going to be troublesome the entire time." He pointed his chopsticks at her. "You've been kunoichi for a year now, so you should already know that your responsibility to the village and the Hokage isn't something that just stops when it's inconvenient. If you only want to be shinobi when it suits you then just work in the flower shop and forget about being ninja."

"That is so easy for you to say. You actually want to go."

The corner of his lips turned down. "I've been on missions I didn't want Ino."

She broke eye contact with him. She still felt guilty that her two boys had nearly died while she was sitting at home. There was no way she was going to let them go somewhere without her. "Yeah, well we both know the real reason behind this assignment, you just want to see that sand nin. Well there is **no way** I am letting you go there without me to watch out for you. I'm going."

"Fine." He had known all along that she would.

They went over a few details about what to bring and when and where to meet. With the meal over the three of them headed out to pack. Their homes were all in different directions so they would normally go their own way as soon as they left the restaurant.

"Shikamaru, walk me home." Ino spoke as soon as Chouji was out of sight.

"Ino I have to pack; besides it would be..."

She grabbed him by the arm and yanked him. "Shikamaru I swear to you if you tell me it would be troublesome I'll take possession of your body and make you skip through town singing, *I am woman hear me roar.*" He blanched at so cruel a threat and came over. As soon as he was beside her she slipped her arm around his and they began walking arm in arm towards her house. "You used to walk me home like this all the time remember?"

"When we were eight."

"I always liked having you take me home why did you stop?"

His look was blank but there was a hint of something in his voice. "You told me to. Don't you remember? You said you wanted Sasuke to be the one to take you home."

That was right! How had she forgotten that? "I'm sorry Shikamaru; I should never have said that. I thought if Sasuke saw me walking home alone he would want to walk with me." She shrugged her shoulders. "But he never did."

They walked on in silence for a bit. Ino noticed some of the smiles of the people passing them. They thought they were a couple. *Would that be so bad?*

"I cried." He said suddenly.

She stopped and so did he. "What?"

He looked at her with that lazy carefree expression but she could hear an ache in his voice. "When you told me that I thought it meant you didn't like me. I went home and I cried." *Why am I telling her this?*

"Skika-kun I am so sorry, I never knew."

He smiled, and whatever had been in his voice was gone. "Don't be sorry, it was a long time ago and we were only kids. Besides, a man should never cry." He began walking and she fell back into step with him.

"You weren't a man then you were just a boy."

"Principle still applies."

"Shikamaru why *her* ? Why is it when you finally get interested in a girl it's got to be a kunoichi from another village? I mean aren't there enough beautiful girls for you to choose from right here?"

"I'm sure every village has its share of beautiful women."

"Well then do you really think she is sooo much more beautiful then the girls right here?"

"You are the one obsessed with looks. I think she is beautiful, but if her looks were all there were to her I would have no interest."

"Then what is it? You barely even know her but you're ready to go 500 miles into a burning desert just to see her. Tell me why."

He thought about that. "Sometimes she can be very warm."

Ino stared at him. "Sometimes she's warm?" She replied in a lifeless monotone. "That's it?"

He shrugged. "I also like her chicken."

Ino just looked at him and didn't know what to say. So they just kept walking towards her home. As they went she thought back to that horrible morning at the Nara's kitchen. When she had gotten the call from Sakura she had refused to believe it. Shikamaru would not suddenly start making out with strange girls where everyone could see. That was about as likely as... Uchiha Sasuke abandoning his village to go follow its worst enemy. So she had run over to the Nara's just to hear the truth from Shikamaru himself. Oh she had heard the truth all right. He had gone into disgusting detail about what that filthy slut had said and done. The girl had just teased and played with him and he had been too ignorant to see through her. And as she had listened she had gotten confused, angry, and hurt. She had never seen Mr. 'I am too lazy to even pick up a pencil to take a test' as a potential boyfriend. But hearing him talk about another girl like that had sent a pain through her. She didn't want him; but she **did** want him to want her, at least a little. They had known each other all their lives and could not be closer. So how was it exactly that when Shika finally woke up to the wonders of the opposite sex it was with some foreigner he hardly knew?

They came to a halt outside her front door. He smoothly unhooked his arm from hers. "I'll see you tomorrow." He said as he turned to leave.

"Oh, Shikamaru do you remember what we would always do after you walked me home?" Before he could object she leaned in and planted a quick kiss on his cheek. " *Thank you Shika-kun.*" She said in a high pitched imitation of an eight year olds voice.

He gave her a small smirk. Well why not? " *You're welcome Ino-chan* ." Feeling slightly ridiculous he completed the little ritual.

She smiled at him. Why had that felt so good? For a second it had felt just as it had when they were kids. "You know you should keep in mind that you don't have to go all the way to Suna to get a beautiful blonde to kiss you." With that she hurried inside.

Shikamaru wondered what all that had been about. At least she seemed to be in a better mood. He could only hope that it would last awhile. He supposed that whole episode had just been Ino's way of finding out more about Temari. But if Ino was feeling better she had also managed to sour his mood. He shook his head in wonder, she didn't even remember? She had crushed him like a bug and it had been such a small thing to her she couldn't even recall doing it. When they were kids he had thought she was the most wonderful girl in the world. She was his wonderful Ino-chan and he'd had a full blown crush. He had been completely in love in that special way only small children can ever be. Then one day he had gone to put his arm around hers and she had pulled away. She had told him straight out not to do that again, that she was going to get Sasuke to walk her home. His heart had been broken. He had run all the way home holding back the tears. When he got home he found his mom and he cried. His mom had put her arms around him and told him it would be all right. She had held him close and comforted him until his tears went away.

Just like Temari did. He thought about Temari and his heart quickened just a bit. When Ino had asked why her he could have given a different answer: *Because she never pulled away.*

The sun was going down. She stopped for a bit to admire the magnificent sunset. It had been a pretty typical day; up before dawn to make breakfast, then out with Baki-sensei to train all day on taijutsu and ninjutsu under the merciless desert sun for ten hours, now she was on her way home for a hot bath before dinner and bed. Heading home people gave her a wide berth while acknowledging her with a shy smile or a respectful nod. As she got inside she was very glad to be home again. She moved to the main stairwell to get up to her room and private bath. She gave the small table beside the stairs a glance, that was where all messages for the Sabaku family were left. There looked to be several pieces of official correspondence. Then she spotted something with her name on it. It was a small scroll, the kind that was placed on birds. Usually those

were only used for official business; but there was no state seal on it. Someone had spent a good bit of ryu to have this sent to her by the fastest means possible. Curious she broke the seal open.

The message was short and to the point, it was all of ten words.

Temari: I like steak. See you on the twentieth. Shikamaru

A precious item

Author's Notes: I just thought I would include this observation. Has anyone noticed the interesting mix of the technologies that do and do not seem to exist in the Naruto world? They have computers, radio transmitters and receivers, monitors and cameras, modern hospital equipment, and modern ships. Yet at the same time they rely on birds for, 'air mail,' as the fastest form of long distance communication. Think about it, if one Kage needs to speak to another they can't pick up a phone, send an email, send a radio message, or even use a telegraph. There seem to be no cars or trucks, railroads, paved highways, planes, helicopters, or means of long distance communications. So in the Naruto world you can have a cat scan performed or have security monitors controlled by your computer but you *can't* drive around town or pick up the phone and call someone in another village. In my story the assumption is that these technologies *don't* exist. After all if you were able to pick up a phone and call someone hundreds of miles away wouldn't a Kage use this method rather than a bird? Especially in an emergency. Likewise even if cars and trucks were rare they would still at least be used by the wealthy and powerful or by people like merchants who make their living by moving long distances. Thus in my story people have digital cameras and microwave ovens but can't place a long distance call and depend on wooden wagons pulled by horses. Feel free to comment and let me know what you think about this.

Thanks for the reviews as I am now up to ten. Please keep reviewing and letting me know what you think. I am going to try and post new chapters weekly until the story is done. As always, please enjoy.

It was early. She had already showered and dressed and could smell her moms cooking. Everything had been packed last night and she was ready to go. She found herself standing in front of her bureau and looking at the couple dozen photos that sat on top of it. Her dad was a camera nut and loved to document all the happy times in their

lives. She loved the pictures too since they reminded her of the ones she loved. About half of them were of her with her parents at different times in her life. There was one of her and Sakura standing outside the flower shop. All the rest were pictures of her and her two boys. She had picked these out of the hundreds her dad had taken, they were her favorites.

I don't have even one of Sasuke. Why had she never noticed that before? He was the boy she had, 'loved' since her early Academy days. How long had she devoted her thoughts and energy towards finding a means of winning his heart? She had damaged her friendship with Sakura and even pushed her two boys back; all for his sake. *Why?* She was shocked to find she didn't have a ready answer. When she had first lain eyes on the dark brooding boy she, along with half the girls in class, had fallen in, 'love.' But wasn't love supposed to make you happy? Try as she might she could not remember one happy moment from actually being with Sasuke. She had some good memories of her competition with Sakura and the others, but what had Sasuke ever said or done to actually make her happy? Moments of being ignored or avoided or being told she was annoying and pushy she had an abundance of. But there had never been a single smile or even a single kind word from him, not in all the time she had known him. And now he was a missing nin and a traitor. He was indirectly responsible for nearly killing Chouji and he had deliberately tried to kill Naruto, his best friend. It was not impossible that one day they would come across him on a mission and he would be the enemy. So what exactly had all that chasing gotten her in the end?

She picked up one of the picture frames. It was the most recent addition. It had been taken a couple months ago and it showed a thin, and kind of handsome, Chouji happily munching a bag of potato chips. His dad and Shikaku were on one side of the hospital bed and she and Shikamaru were on the other. Everyone was laughing and smiling. When the news had first come in that they had returned from the retrieval mission she and Sakura had rushed to the hospital. Sakura had gone to see Naruto and Sasuke (who they had both

presumed to have been rescued) while she had wanted to see Chouji. When one of her boys had nearly died she had not thought about him at all. *I would rather see Sasuke dead and buried than lose one of them.*

She set the picture back and with one hand reached beneath her shirt to a silver chain. She pulled out the small silver onyx pendant she always wore beneath her clothes. She smiled at it; it was the very first piece of jewelry she had ever gotten. It was also tangible proof of the connection the three of them shared. Their connection was so strong that nothing would ever break it short of death. She loved both of them and was not ashamed to admit it. And whatever happened she knew Shikamaru would still love her as well, just as she knew Chouji always would. But whether or not it was selfish she didn't want to lose her place as the most important girl in Shikamaru's life.

"Princess," her father called from down the hall. "Breakfast is ready."

"Coming daddy," she answered. She put the pendant back beneath her shirt and exited her room.

"Give this to her as soon as you see her." Yoshino pushed a small package with a pink bow on it across the table.

He stopped shoveling egg into his mouth and looked dubiously at the thing. He made no effort to reach for it. "What is that?"

"These are silk hair ties, I guarantee you she will love them. Be sure to say you bought them for her."

"Mom I really don't think..."

"And for goodness sakes Shikamaru tell her you missed her and she looks beautiful. A girl loves to hear that and it would not kill you to take someone else's feelings into account once in awhile."

"All right," he took the package and slipped it into the backpack. He would decide whether or not to give it to her later. Accepting it seemed the best option. He was worried that if he refused his mother would go into another one of her excruciating lectures on romance.

His parents shared a look, and he saw the barest of nods from his mom. His dad reached into his Jonin vest and pulled something out. "You should take this as well."

Shikamaru stared at the small silver onyx pendant and gaped like a fish on the hook. "I am not taking that! There is **no** way I am going to give her that!"

"Good, I'm glad to see how seriously you take this." His dad said.

"You probably shouldn't give it to her." His mom added.

"Then why do you want me to bring it?"

"On the off chance you are *sure* you want to give it to her we want you to be able to." Shikaku said.

"Dad there is no way I know her well enough to ask her to accept that."

He lifted an eyebrow. "But you know her well enough to hound the Hokage for a mission to Suna?"

"That's different." He crossed his arms over his chest and looked defiant.

His mom leaned forward just a bit. "Take it."

One look at his mom's face and he reached out to accept the precious item. He dropped it into one of his vest pockets. "When did you have this commissioned?"

"The day after she left." His dad answered with a smile.

"I am still not going to give it to her."

"That's fine dear," his mother said. "Now hurry up and finish your breakfast you don't want to be late."

She was humming as she poured the oatmeal into the bowls. She kept right on humming as she sat down and spread some brown sugar and cinnamon on hers. Gaara had a slightly curious look on his face but simply took his spoon and began to eat. Kankuro knew that there had to be something wrong. Temari was rarely in a good mood in the morning and she absolutely never hummed. Since Gaara wasn't stepping up it was up to him.

"All right sis what's going on?"

She smiled up from her breakfast. "Why whatever do you mean brother dear?" She answered in a sing song voice.

He blanched, ok this had to be *really* bad if she was practically singing and calling him, 'dear.' "What the hell has got you in such a good mood today?"

"Why I am happy at our village's booming economy!"

"Economy? What are you planning to get a part time job or something?"

"I am just pleased to see that inter village trade has begun to pick up again."

He looked at her in complete confusion. "What?"

"Well did you know for instance that no less than five caravans are scheduled to arrive in Suna over the next week?"

He was still not getting it. "I'm not an expert, but isn't that about normal?"

"It is." Gaara surprised them by answering.

"Well I just find it wonderful that they come here bringing exotic goods from all over the world."

"Exotic right, so what is one of them bringing a shipment of diamonds or something?"

"Maybe, they have diamond mines in Fire country don't they?"

He laughed. "Ok, now I get it! Let me just guess one of these exotic caravans is coming from Konoha isn't it?" She nodded. "And you're thinking that lazy ass leaf nin is going to be guarding it don't you?" She nodded again. "Sis you are so deluded it's almost sad, there is no way he is going to be on that caravan."

She smiled at him sweetly. "I don't suppose you'd care to up the bet then?"

He nodded eagerly. "I'm already a third of the way home. Did you have something in mind?"

She rubbed her chin as though thinking. "Well we've covered pride so what about chores? How about a month of you making breakfast against a month of my polishing the wood finishings?"

"Deal!" He hated polishing and jumped at that chance to be free of it for awhile.

They pressed hands to seal the wager. "Sucker!" She burst out laughing and tossed him a small piece of paper. "Read it and weep."

He took the paper and did exactly that. "Crap." His sister let out another laugh. He gave her an annoyed look. "Maybe he is just playing a little joke on you."

"Well if you believe that we could always up the bet again, how two months?"

He shook his head. He had played enough cards to know better than to raise on a losing hand. She was the first to finish breakfast. Before heading out she gave her brother's thick brown hair a shake. "Now don't get a haircut." She practically skipped out of the kitchen.

Kankuro stared as she went. It was just a little creepy seeing her this happy. He looked down at his half eaten oatmeal and found he had no more appetite. Unless that leaf nin was a lot crueler than he thought possible or there was some minor miracle he was going to lose the bet. "Say Gaara..."

"No," his brother answered immediately. "No one forced you to bet."

"I know," he said miserably.

"Next time do not bet what you are unprepared to lose."

He put his hand on the top of his head. "This is going to be so bad."

"You know I can't believe we're going on a three week mission without Asuma." Chouji said as they were jogging along beside the carts.

"You should get used to it, once you and Ino become Chunin he won't be in charge of us anymore." Shikamaru said.

"I can't even imagine not having Asuma looking out for us."

Shikamaru smiled at his friend. "Asuma will **always** look out for us. He just won't be able to do it as often because he won't be our captain anymore."

"Hey Shikamaru," Ino spoke up. "What exactly are the orders anyway?"

"We are to provide general protection and security for a merchant train consisting of twenty five wagons carrying implements and

goods to Suna. We are to remain in Suna while the merchants acquire a new cargo and then escort them back to Konoha. Duration is expected to be twenty one days possibly longer. Seven days to Suna, seven days there, and then seven days to return." He had memorized the mission statement.

"Seven days to get to Suna? It shouldn't take more than three."

"If it were just you, me, and Chouji going there then yes. But horses and wagons can't move as fast as shinobi." He nodded toward the carts and their pace.

She let out a sigh. "This is going to be boring isn't it?" A very small part of her regretted not staying and going to Sakura's party.

"You should try and enjoy it. I suspect our time in Suna will be very interesting and very, very troublesome."

A new look

He moved like lightning and struck hard with a three hit combo; left, right, and an open palm to the face. She went flying. She was flat on her ass looking up at him and tasting blood. He stood over her open hand extended.

She sat up and spat out some blood. "I am going to kick your ass one of these days."

His lips twitched just a bit. "I have no doubt you will, but not today."

She took his hand and let him help her up. "Let's go again."

He shook his head. "That's enough taijutsu training for one day." He tossed her a canteen. "Don't forget we have a two day patrol beginning tomorrow."

She spat out a bit more blood and then took a long drink. The water was stale and warm; and tasted sweeter than wine. "I know, Kankuro was bitching about it all morning. He doesn't think we should be stuck with patrol anymore."

"You are all still Genin, whatever your abilities or birth. So long as I am your Jonin sensei we will continue to take regular turns at patrol."

She held out her hands defensively. "Hey I agree. I'm happy to be out protecting my village. I'm just glad I'll be back by the twentieth."

He waited as she picked up her fan. "What is special about the twentieth?" They began walking back to Suna.

She looked at the ground, Baki was her father figure. Unlike her biological father he'd actually been there for her and given a damn about all the hardships she'd endured in her life. She actually cared what he thought. "Well I am expecting to meet someone."

"Really, who?"

Such a simple question. "A friend," she answered suddenly feeling like a small girl caught with a hand in the sweets jar.

He stopped walking and stared with his one eye. "Who is this friend?" His tone said he wanted a direct answer.

She studied the ground. Why was this so embarrassing? "It's Nara Shikamaru from the Leaf village."

He said nothing for a moment. "I see." They began walking again.

"It's not what you think." She said quickly.

"Why do you sound worried? He's the same one whose life you saved and who invited you into his home correct?"

"Yes."

"I presume you will be inviting him into yours?"

"I was planning on it."

"Temari there is nothing wrong with extending this boy some hospitality, it is only proper." He gave her a bit of a smile. "You know you *can* be friends with people outside our village."

They walked on for a bit. This was awkward, but she wanted his opinion. "What if we were a little more than friends?"

He shot her a look of complete astonishment. "Temari! You haven't..."

"NO!" She shook her head vehemently. "Baki I swear nothing at all has happened, we haven't even kissed." She could feel herself blushing.

"But you would not object if he were to offer you a kiss." She said nothing but got a shade redder. "Temari, there is nothing wrong with being friends with a foreign nin. But to be anything more would make your life very complicated."

"So what else would be new?" She spoke with just a hint of bitterness. "My life is already more complicated than one of Kankuro's puppets. At least with him I feel..."

"What?" He said cautiously.

She took a deep breath. "I feel like he sees me. Just me, not the first daughter of Sabaku, or Gaara's sister, or the Kazekage's daughter; just me."

"You're not used to that are you?"

"Not with anyone outside of you or my brothers."

They walked for a bit more. "I haven't actually met him but I remember your match at the exams. He's very intelligent and if he had the good manners to invite you to meet with his family his intentions are likely honorable. He is the heir to his clan is he not?"

"He is."

"Do you think I could meet him?"

"That depends; you're not going to try and scare him off are you?"

He shook his head. "On the lives of my clansmen I swear my only interest is in getting to know him."

"What happens if you don't like him?"

"I will tell you." He said simply. "I trust your judgment and your ability to deal with him on your own terms."

She smiled and felt a huge relief. "Thank you Baki!"

He just smiled back and they continued towards home. He did care for her as he would for his own daughter. She'd had little happiness in her life and he wanted to see her happy. Even if it was likely to only be for a short while.

"The days are boiling hot, the nights are freezing cold, and there isn't a tree or a blade of grass for miles on end. **Why** would anyone deliberately live here?" Ino complained yet again.

"I really have no idea, why don't you ask them?" He nodded towards the four Sand nins stationed at the stone gatehouse. There was a Jonin and three Chunins. They were processing the last of the wagon drivers before allowing them to enter. The Sand nins had been keeping a discreet eye on them, not openly hostile, but not friendly either.

"No, thanks," she muttered. They had been on the road for seven days, the last three of them in the desert. She was hot, sweaty, and dirty and longing for a hot bath with plenty of soap.

When the last wagon rolled through Shikamaru and his team approached the gatehouse. The Jonin eyed his vest and took a few steps to meet him. The Chunins hung back and watched suspiciously. The Jonin simply confirmed that they had been hired by the merchants and then carefully inspected their identification. Satisfied things were in order he had the three of them fill out a few forms. Once that was done he handed each of them a temporary Visa good for exactly seven days.

"If your business should keep you here beyond a week you will need to check in with the registration office in the Tower of Winds. Be sure to keep those with you at all times." The Jonin explained. He was being carefully polite.

"Thank you." Shikamaru replied, cautious to be equally polite. "We have rooms waiting for us at the Quatarra Inn. Could you give us directions how to get there?"

"That place is a run down flea bag in the middle of the merchant quarter. Couldn't your Hokage have splurged on something more fitting for one of her favorite Chunin?"

Shikamaru looked over to see a familiar face rounding the corner of the gatehouse. At the sight of her the Sand nins all immediately offered her a bow which she graciously returned. "Hello Temari, I was not expecting you to meet me until after I got settled in."

She walked over to him with a young woman a few years older than her a couple paces behind. "Well I had to make sure you didn't get lost coming into the village. Some of the roads can be very confusing." She gave him a small smile. As she was about to stand in front of him a young girl in a dusty purple outfit slid between them.

"Shikamaru! Aren't you going to introduce us to your **girlfriend**?" Ino gave the taller girl a huge smile that did not touch her pupil less blue eyes.

Temari was surprised to find herself being challenged, but decided to ignore it momentarily. She focused on Shikamaru. "So you've been telling everyone I'm your girlfriend, huh?" Her smile expanded.

"Uhhhm... well..."

She shifted focus to the girl in front of her. "Actually I haven't decided whether or not to *permit* him to call me that. I did decide I would grant him permission to court me, but there are 43 other names ahead of him. So he has his work cut out for him."

"You've got 43 guys huh? Wow you must just be *worn out*. "

Temari's mood switched from playful to seriously angry in a flash. Shikamaru decided to take a more active role before someone, likely Ino, got severely hurt. He took a hold of her shoulders and deftly pulled her a step back so he could get between the two. "Temari you haven't actually met my friends and teammates yet. This is Yamanaka Ino and that," pointing behind him, "is Akimichi Chouji."

She looked over to the heavy set boy standing several feet back. She gave him a polite nod. "I am very pleased to meet you Chouji-san, Shikamaru has told me all about you and how much he treasures your friendship. I am very glad you've recovered from your injuries."

Not used to positive attention from any girl except Ino he blushed a bit. "Thank you Temari-san."

"Please, call me Temari or Temari-chan." She then looked at the girl standing just behind Shikamaru. "It's nice meeting you too... Pig."

" **What?!**" Suddenly Shikamaru had his hands full barely restraining his furious teammate.

"Chouji a little help please!"

His friend quickly flashed through several hand signs. " **Body Expansion Technique** ." His hands and arms expanded and he quickly took a firm, but gentle, hold of his teammate and held her away from the other two.

With Ino restrained Shikamaru turned back around to Temari, who had not moved a muscle. "Was that really necessary?"

"What?" She was the picture of innocence. "That is her name right?"

"My name is Ino you blonde bimbo!"

"Like I said, Pig. If you don't like it blame your parents."

Shikamaru shut his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose with one hand. "Temari I've just arrived and you and Ino are already set to fight." Troublesome was not a strong enough word. The only word he could come up with that was close could not be said in front of women.

She let out a sigh. "I didn't come here to cause any trouble for you or your teammates." She pointed to the girl standing behind her. "This

is Tanya, one of the servants of my House. I guessed you might not have the best of accommodations so I took the liberty of getting all of you suites at the Garden Rose Inn, it's the finest hotel in Suna."

"Temari I appreciate the thought but we're on a C-rank mission. It only pays..."

She waved that away. "Don't worry about it, just consider it my way of saying welcome. Oh and speaking of which, Kankuro!" She looked behind her and shouted. "Get your ass out here now!"

"Hell no! I'm not doing it, you can't make me!" He shouted back from somewhere.

"Are you going to go back on it then?" She demanded.

There was an extended moment of silence. Then Kankuro stepped around the corner. "I hate you."

At the sight of her younger brother she gave him a triumphant smile. The three Leaf nins all wore open mouths as they could not believe what they were seeing. Shikamaru looked from Kankuro over to his sister. "Is this some sort of weird welcoming ceremony?"

The sight actually shocked Ino out of her fury and she stopped thrashing in Chouji's grip. "Geez, I thought he looked like a freak before."

"Well what are you waiting for? We haven't got all day." Temari said.

With the look of a man walking the final steps to his own execution Kankuro approached Shikamaru. He was not dressed in his usual black cat pajamas and he was missing his customary makeup. Rather he had on a pair of baggy dark brown colored pants, a loose grey jacket, a black fishnet shirt, and his Suna headband was tied around his left arm. But the real eye catcher was the top knot his hair had been put in. As the Leaf nins all continued to stare Kankuro came to a halt and bowed low to Shikamaru.

"Nara Shikamaru of Konoha village I Sabaku no Kankuro of the village hidden in the sand stand in awe of your vastly superior looks, intelligence, and shinobi skills. I consider you to be my idol and will attempt in some small way to approach your magnificence. In short I would like you to know I consider myself to be your bitch."

When he finished his statement there was once again silence. Shikamaru was looking to Temari to get some hint of what the hell this was. He honestly wondered if all this was some sort of bizarre Suna tradition. The others were just as silent and just as confused. For his part Kankuro was now staring at his sister, obviously furious. Temari was staring right back, looking very content with the world. Surprisingly it was Ino who finally found something to say.

"Did you lose a bet or something?"

An early lunch

Temari was literally doubled over with laughter. Ino's ignorant comment had set her off and she was laughing so hard she thought she just might hurt herself.

"Ok that's it! I did it and I'm going now." Kankuro tore off the hair band and let his hair fall back down. He shot one last look at his sister and started to leave.

"Kankuro," she got out between laughs. "I expect you to keep all the terms."

"I know, I know!" He stormed off and was gone from sight just as quickly as he had appeared.

"What was all that about?" Shikamaru asked.

"I'll tell you later." Temari managed to stand erect again as her laughter finally died down. "I don't think I have ever laughed so hard in my life."

For her part Ino had calmed down, though she was still very angry. "Chouji let go of me right now or I am going to kick you later."

Chouji looked over to Shikamaru. "Ino..."

She frowned at him. "It's ok, I promise not to hurt your girlfriend."

"Hah, I wouldn't be the one who'd get hurt little girl."

"Who are you calling little bimbo?"

Temari sent her a coy smile. "Well you do only come up to my chin." Shikamaru coughed and sent her a look. Temari opened her mouth to say something, but then closed it again. Shikamaru thought he heard her say, 'fine,' under her breath. "Look Pi... uhm, Ino, I'm

terribly sorry if I *accidentally misunderstood* your name." She sent the young kunoichi a look that clearly said that this was as much as she would get.

" *Mistakes* happen; I shouldn't have gotten so upset. It's fine." The look she sent back said it was anything but. Shikamaru nodded and Chouji ended his jutsu releasing their teammate.

Temari made a show of standing beside Shikamaru and lightly touching his shoulder. Ino could only watch.

"Wait, I think I remember you now. Weren't you the one who lost to that cherry blossom girl during the preliminaries?"

"I never lost to Sakura, it was a draw."

"Draw huh? Well I just remember you being knocked out on the arena floor."

"That was a long time ago Temari, we've all come a long way since then." Shikamaru said in a firm tone. Ino smiled, glad to hear Shikamaru *finally* say something in her defense.

Temari looked at him a bit surprised. She slowly took her hand off his shoulder. "I suppose that's true." She looked over to Ino and Chouji. "Well as I've said I've arranged some much better lodgings for all of you. Tanya will show you how to get there." She gave Shikamaru a quick glance. "I will see you later." With that she turned around and left.

Well that certainly hadn't gone the way she'd hoped. She had imagined many different ways how her first meeting with him would go. She had never expected to be insulted by one of his teammates and then have him side with her. She had actually been hoping that after being away from each other for so long he would want to spend some time with her. Given that he had come all the way to Suna to

see her that hadn't seemed like such a far fetched expectation. But maybe he wasn't as eager to be alone with her as she'd thought.

"Oi, Temari hold on!" She looked back to see him hurrying to catch up to her. "Where are you going?"

"I have things to attend to; I just made a little time to make sure you would be able to find your hotel." She did not stop.

"And humiliate your brother."

She tossed him a little smirk. "I can always find time for *that* ." He gave her a small grin. "Anyway shouldn't you be with your teammates?"

"We've been together for seven straight days they can manage without me for awhile. I was hoping we could spend some time together."

Hmmmm, "We can get together later, but right now I'm really very busy." A great thumping lie as she had gone to the trouble of clearing her schedule just for him.

"Then can I walk with you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "If you want," she said indifferently. She slowed her pace and decided on the longest most roundabout way to the Tower.

"Oh! I almost forgot!" He pulled off his backpack and began rummaging through it.

"What are you looking for?" She asked a bit curious.

He took out a small package with a pink bow. Looking just a bit embarrassed he held it out to her. "This is for you." He thought back to the conversation with his mom. "I missed you and you look beautiful."

They stopped walking. She looked at him. "Thank you, I've missed you too." She took the gift and unwrapped it. She pulled out four gold colored silk hair ties. "Shikamaru I love them, thank you!"

He felt himself starting to blush just a little. "Actually my mother picked them out."

"Well she has excellent taste. You should let her pick out all the gifts you get me."

He gave her a bit of a smile. "What makes you think I will be getting you anymore gifts you troublesome woman?"

"Because if you really intend to make me your girlfriend you had *better* remember my birthdays, holidays, and just so you know I consider the dinner with your family our first date so you had better have something for our six month anniversary." She was half teasing but half serious.

He rolled his eyes. "I am with you for less than ten minutes and you are causing me trouble for the next six months. You are so troublesome."

She put her hands on her hips and leaned towards him a bit. "Good thing *some* women are worth the trouble." She enjoyed seeing his blush get a bit darker. She circumspectly put a hand on his arm and moved closer to him. "You know I think I might be able to make just a little extra time today. Are you hungry?"

She led him to a small out of the way restaurant only a few blocks away. It was late morning and the place was half empty. They got a booth in a back corner. She sat next to him and as they ate and talked they both began to relax. A waitress came over and nervously set down some bread all the while giving little nods to Temari.

"Everyone seems to know you." Shikamaru commented once the waitress had withdrawn. He had not missed how people treated her.

She looked a bit uncomfortable. "They know my name; Sabaku is considered the most noble House in Suna, much as Hyuga is in your own village."

Shikamaru thought of the way people would react when the clan head Hiashi would walk down the street. All the reaction to Temari suddenly made much more sense. "It must be nice to get so much respect even from the Jonin and Chunin."

"Not really, people have acted that way towards me my entire life. It's my *birth* they hold in esteem not me." She really wanted to change the subject. "Speaking of esteem I couldn't help but notice you think very well of the pig."

"Please don't call her that."

"Does it bother you?"

"Yes, when Sakura calls her Ino-pig its part of a game those two play. When you call her that it's just hurtful. So I would like you to stop."

"You seem to care a great deal about her feelings." She noted suspiciously.

"She is a teammate and a very close friend. Our fathers were also teammates and our clans have been allied to one another since the founding of our village. I've known Ino and Chouji all my life and they are both dear to me."

"You know it almost sounds like you are a little in love with her."

"I am in love with her." Temari shot him a stunned look. "I love her as a very close and dear friend. Do you remember when we were playing Shogi?"

"Sure."

"You said to me that if I was serious about you I would have to learn to deal with Kankuro and Gaara because they were a part of your life and they weren't going anywhere. Well, if you want to be with me you will have to deal with Ino because she's not going anywhere. And calling her pig all the time will not help."

She didn't look very happy about that. "When you put it like that I suppose I understand. So the two of you were never anything more than friends?"

He looked contemplative. "Well there was a time when she would kiss me almost every day."

Temari's eyes became slits. "Really, how long ago was this?"

"It was when we were eight; she would give me little kisses on the cheek."

Relief flooded her. "Well that's fine just so long as she isn't giving you any kisses *now*." His mind flashed to that playful kiss when he had walked her home. His survival instinct told him to purge the memory immediately. "I had better not ever see any other woman's lips touching you or I will make you and her sorry."

"I'll be sure to inform my mom."

She spoke as one making a great sacrifice. "I'll allow an exception for your mother."

"She'll be relieved to hear that."

"Tell me something, was **Ino**," she deliberately stressed the name. "Ever someone's fan girl?"

Shikamaru looked at her in surprise. "Yes actually, she and half the girls in my Academy class used to chase after Uchiha Sasuke. I am not sure but she may still have some feelings for him."

"I knew it." He lifted an eye brow. "She just struck me as fan girl material." Before he could ask she pressed on. "So did you like my brother's new wardrobe?"

"Well it was an improvement. So what was all that about?"

"The blonde actually had it right, he lost a bet."

"He did all that just because he lost a bet?"

"That's right, just like with our hospitality we take our betting seriously."

Given the evidence he had seen he came to a swift decision. "In that case I will never make a bet with you."

She laughed. "Wow! Maybe you really are a genius. You've just proven you're smarter than Kankuro at least."

"High praise indeed," he said rather dryly. This set her to laughing again. "So what was the bet?"

"Well if you must know it was whether or not you would come to see me."

"I appreciate your faith in me. What would have happened if I hadn't come?"

"Three things," she replied. "First, I would have had to put on a servant's dress and cook and serve a dinner for Kankuro and one of his, 'girlfriends.' Second, I agreed that I would no longer interfere with the horde of idiot girls he brings in and out of our house. Oh, and just so you know, since I won Kankuro has promised never to threaten or attack you."

Shikamaru looked mildly amused. "Was that an actual possibility? I keep hearing about hospitality, I would think that would preclude beating up your guests."

"He wouldn't have done anything while you were a guest in our home, but he might have wanted to harass you later, now he won't."

"So what would have been the third thing?"

She smiled sweetly. "I would have come to Konoha and beaten you to death."

"Good thing I came then."

"Yes, I hate cleaning blood out of my fan." Their meal continued in the same vein as they both relaxed in each other's company.

They were standing outside the Garden Rose. Following their meal they had strolled over to the hotel. Temari had been on his arm the entire time pointing out favorite places and telling him of local customs and points of interest.

"So there's a Spring festival tomorrow night?" He said.

"Yes, the whole village turns out for a night of music and dancing. You'll be taking me of course."

He shook his head slightly. "Shouldn't the man ask the woman that?"

"Well I've been asked by about a dozen of my *other* suitors already. I suppose I could simply go with one of them."

"Temari would you like to go to the Spring festival with me?"

She decided to keep him waiting for a bit as she pretended to consider it. "Well I don't know you're not as *handsome* or *interesting* as some of them." She let out a dramatic sigh. "But I suppose I can take pity on you and allow you to escort me there." She regretfully let go of his arm. "Dinner tonight is at seven. Tanya will take you over to my home so meet her in the lobby by at least six thirty. And though I

know you've been traveling for a week at least *try* and look presentable. Now there is one last thing I have to ask you."

"What?"

"How do you like your steak?"

A special dessert

Ino soaked in the warm soapy water and tried to let all her aches and worries melt away. She was willing to give Temari credit for one thing at least. She had not been joking about getting them a better place to stay. Tanya had brought them to a magnificent five story building and led them to the front desk. The hotel manager had personally informed them that they had each been given suites on their top floor and that all the hotel amenities were theirs to use at no cost. Chouji had immediately asked about food, the manager had pointed to their restaurant and informed him room service was available from 5 a.m. until 11 p.m. Needless to say Chouji had made a quick move to the restaurant. Ino had a different priority and had requested extra soap, bubble bath, towels and even scented candles. When she had finally entered her suite she had found four luxurious rooms that included a mammoth bed as well as a huge bath.

It had taken all of five minutes to get out of her clothes, fill the tub, and get her candles lit. She didn't think there was anything that could feel better than a nice hot bath; especially when you were tired and stressed. Lying there in the soapy water she shut her eyes and replayed the morning's events. The words to describe them ran the gambit from infuriating to down right bizarre. And to top it all off their team leader and given them a quick brush off to chase after the girl who had been insulting her. At the center of all of it had been that oversized overbearing Sand nin. She had seen her before of course; at the preliminaries and again during Shikamaru's match. She had missed her completely during her two days in Konoha where she and Shikamaru had suddenly become an item. The two of them had never exchanged a single word before this morning. And now that they had Ino was convinced of one thing, Temari was not the girl for Shikamaru.

It was just so *obvious* . The two of them clashed, she was much too aggressive for the laid back boy for them to have any possibility of working out. Never mind the fact that she was from a different village

or that she was the sister of that creepy Gaara. Either of those things should have immediately marked her as, 'too troublesome,' with big red letters. But no, he'd gone chasing right after her. For that matter he had gone chasing after this mission just so he could get a kiss, all for just one kiss.

A part of her melted at that thought, it was so romantic. She couldn't help but imagine what it would have been like if Sasuke would have done *anything* like that for her. Where did Shikamaru, of all people, suddenly get a romantic side from and where the hell had it been hiding this whole time?

There was also another part of her, the part that always had to push to get things done. *That* part was telling her to forget romance and focus on the cold hard facts. Shikamaru was a late bloomer when it came to dating, he had just finally realized that there really were some non troublesome things you could do with a girl. He was a genius when it came to tactics and shogi, but in matters of the heart he was a complete novice. So by chance or by planning an older exotic girl had been there at exactly the right time and place to get his attention. It was nothing new; young inexperienced boy falls for older more experienced girl. And Ino was certain she was *much* more experienced. Forty three boyfriends? Disgusting! And the slut had actually had the nerve to throw it in his face as though it were something to be proud of!

She needed to focus on the problem. Namely that Shikamaru was in danger of losing his heart to a girl who clearly was only having a little bit of fun. She knew talking to him was pointless. Trying to get Temari to leave him alone would be equally fruitless. She was a stranger here so she could not recruit other girls to help put pressure on the bimbo to leave him alone. Simply beating the bitch up was also not a viable option. So what did that leave? She imagined pushing him into an unoccupied closet and introducing him to a little game called, 'five minutes in heaven.' She felt her face get very hot. Was she actually thinking about doing that with *Shikamaru* ? No! That wouldn't work and she would just come off as a slut in his eyes.

The problem was they were here in Suna and he was bound and determined to see her now.

She should have started working on this problem two months ago. She could have dragged him along to some parties and gotten him interested in some of her friends. But she had assumed that with Temari gone the whole embarrassing incident could be forgotten. Just one more funny story from their collective past. But then the idiot had gotten this mission and the incident had gotten recast as a pending disaster. The truth was she simply never imagined that Mr. lazy would go through such an effort. *He complains about walking me home but he'll travel 500 miles for that pushy tramp.* So how exactly was she supposed to stop someone willing to do that from reaching his goal?

She honestly didn't know, but she would keep trying. She was *not* going to stand by and let anyone break his heart.

Shikamaru had to admit the Garden Rose was certainly several steps up from the sort of places he usually stayed in while on a mission. The hotel manager had greeted him and informed him that all the hotel services were available to him with the bill being paid by Sabaku. He didn't honestly care for that, having Temari paying for their stay, especially not when it would be a very hefty bill. But since he was here he had asked about laundry services. He'd had his clothes washed pressed and returned to him. He'd taken a long shower to finally get the sand and dust off. He was now dressed in clean cream colored shirt and pants and his green Chunin vest. The clock on the wall said 6:25 and he was about to go downstairs. His heart was beating a bit faster than normal and he felt that combination of fear and excitement that was usually reserved for going into a fight. He opened his door. Ino and Chouji were standing in front of him.

"Perfect timing," Ino said. "We were just going to see if you were ready to eat."

"Their restaurant serves barbecue." Chouji sounded as if her were in heaven.

"I'm sorry, I guess I forgot to mention it, I'm going to have dinner with Temari."

Chouji sent him an approving smile. Ino did not. "Well how nice." She murmured.

He slid past his teammates and headed for the stairwell. "Have a good time Shika!" Chouji called after.

"But not too good." Ino said much too softly for anyone to hear.

"You should feel most honored Shikamaru-sama."

"Tanya please stop calling me that, just plain Shikamaru works fine."

The pretty dark haired girl smiled and nodded. "As you like Shikamaru, you should feel most honored. You are the first suitor invited to dinner since the death of the Kazekage."

"So they don't make an effort to see her?" He said with careful lack of concern.

"The ones living outside of Suna? Not really, though when the Daimyo's son arrives next month he will likely expect an invitation. The twenty or so who live here send requests to see her almost daily."

"Daily?"

She nodded absently. "Then of course there are the flowers and chocolates, though they only come every few days." She frowned. "We put those in her room; Kankuro-sama always eats the chocolates whenever he sees them first."

"So she's bombarded with invitations and chocolates and flowers?"
He said feeling a bit disheartened.

Not noticing Tanya continued. "Then of course are the gifts she receives on her birthdays and appropriate holidays. When she turned 16 the Daimyo's son sent her a beautiful ornamental fan encrusted with emeralds the same shade as her eyes, it was easily worth a small fortune."

"A fortune?" *And I gave her some hair ties my mom picked out.*

Tanya heard the note of sadness in his voice and looked at him in surprise. "Shikamaru-samaplease don't look downcast. For all their gifts and kind thoughts Temari-sama has never invited any of them to come and see her. That she has gone through so much effort to not only invite but to greet you on your arrival says much."

"I suppose."

"She threw out her other hair ties."

"Hmmm?"

"She had about a dozen of them, all silk of course. She gave them to me and asked me to get rid of them. She said from now on she would only be using the ones you gave to her."

"Well that was nice of her."

She gave him an exasperated look. "Shikamaru-sama I understand that traditions are different in different villages. You do not truly understand what it means that she broke bread with your family in your home?" She continued, determined to spell things out for him. "In Suna a man does not invite a woman to dine with his parents unless his intentions are very serious. In Suna a woman would *never* accept such an invitation unless she *welcomed* such an interest." She gave him a very intent look. "Do you begin to understand how highly she thinks of you?"

"I thought she was just being nice. When I invited her to dinner it was just because I wanted to see her."

A look of concern touched her eyes. "Do you not welcome Temari-sama's interest?"

He thought carefully about that. "Her interest makes me happier than anything else ever has. I care about Temari a lot and I want to see her. But when I invited her to dinner I didn't realize I was committing to..."

"Who has used the word commitment?" She shook her head. "Shikamaru-sama, Temari-sama is pleased to have you *court* her. Do not suppose our traditions are so different that anything more has occurred. I simply wanted to make you aware that you need not be concerned about the attentions she receives from others as she only seeks *your* attention."

"Oh, thanks that actually helps. And again please just call me Shikamaru."

"As you wish, Shikamaru you are in a very fortunate position, one any man in Suna would gladly trade for." She gave him a hint of a smile. "I would suggest you try not to screw it up." She giggled and he relaxed just a bit.

As they approached the complex it was not hard to pick out. Every building he'd seen so far was made of the same reddish brown stone. It gave Suna a rather monotonous look as the entire place tries to blend into the surrounding desert. The Sabaku complex was surrounded by a ten foot wall of the same colored brick. Through the iron gate however Shikamaru saw a vast mansion composed of stunningly pure white marble. It was a vast two story building bounded by its protective wall.

"It's almost as big as the Hyuga complex." Shikamaru noted. "There are dozens of Hyuga clan members how many of Sabaku live here?"

"Sadly only three, the clan has suffered during the long wars and border disputes Wind country has had to endure."

"So Temari is the head of her clan?"

"No, it is the law here that the eldest son is clan head."

Shikamaru felt horror. " *Kankuro* ?"

But Tanya shook her head. "When the Kazekage died the position fell to him, but he declined it. Gaara-sama is clan head of Sabaku." A slight involuntary shiver ran through her at the mention of Gaara.

As the two of them followed a stone pathway from the gate to the building Shikamaru studied the vast front yard. There were a dozen or so palm trees, mostly near the outer wall. The rest of the area was covered in blue pebbles. It gave the complex an oddly colorful look.

"Why don't you have a lawn?" She looked puzzled. "I'm wondering why you don't have a grass lawn."

"Grass? I don't understand would you expect herd animals to be kept here?"

"No, it just looks better that's all."

"Strange customs," she muttered to herself. "In the desert water is more precious than gold, it is life itself. No one would even think to waste it on grass." She paused a bit. "Though a few people do keep gardens, those at least serve a purpose."

When they got to the front door she opened it for him. He felt a bit odd having a woman do that for him. Once inside they were finally out of the heat. Shikamaru fell into step with her as she guided him past the main hall way. Every inch of the floor was covered in expensive rugs, there seemed to be miles of polished oak along the walls, there were pictures with hand carved frames, and furniture that looked to be antique. Everything he saw spoke of wealth and

power. The Nara's were a powerful clan themselves. They owned over 12,000 acres of forest and pasture and had a herd of over 800 deer. Everyone in his family worked hard, but that was by choice they were very comfortable financially. But compared to *this* he might as well have grown up in a shack.

It was truly beginning to dawn on him that Temari was from a different realm; not only from a different village and society, but from an alien social class as well. Could he really be with a girl like her? What could he really give her?

There was a delicious smell wafting down the hallway. They came through a wide door and into the dining hall. There was a long polished table with perhaps twenty chairs. The two nearest the entrance had place setting and trays of food already set out. A pair of candles provided the only light. Shikamaru barely noticed. There standing before him was Temari, beautiful Temari. She was wearing a silver and blue kimono, her hair was down past her shoulders, and his mind somehow registered that she had make up on, including a bright red lipstick. His eyes were drawn to her full lips and to those amazing teal eyes. In that moment he couldn't help but think that she was an angel come down from heaven. She looked into his eyes and she smiled. Oh, but this was a special smile. It didn't hold any mischief or self satisfaction. It was a soft smile, a gentle smile, a *loving* smile? It was the smile she had given him at the hospital as she wiped his cheeks and somehow he knew without her ever saying it that this smile was only for him.

"Hello Shikamaru."

"Hey Temari."

"Tanya you can go, you can have the rest of the night off."

"Thank you Temari-sama." She bowed and beat a hasty retreat, leaving the two of them all alone.

Temari's eyes never left his as she took a step towards him. "You've never seen me out of my shinobi clothes or with my hair down." She did a little twirl for him. "What do you think?"

"I think you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen." In horror he clamped down his jaw. But it was too late, the words were out there.

She let out a slightly pleased giggle and slowly came over to him. With each step she seemed to lusciously roll her hips. "Really?" She put a hand on his chest and leaned in close to him. "Well aren't you sweet?" He could smell her perfume, it was sweet jasmine. "I dismissed all the servants and Kankuro and Gaara are both out right now."

"So we're alone?" He was relieved he had least said that without having his voice crack.

She nodded and with her other hand she touched his cheek. "I've made us a nice dinner and it's ready, but first we really need to take care of one piece of business."

"Business?" His mind was blank.

"I believe I promised you something if you came here to see me?" All at once his heart was pounding so hard he was afraid it just might burst. His eyes slipped from hers to those red lips. She drew her face closer to his and he tried not to panic at the thought of what was about to happen. She moved in slowly, oh so slowly, and then pressed her lips to his cheek. And immediately she let go and was walking back over to the table. "Well then now we can have dinner."

He just stood there. She looked at him with one of her usual impish grins. "Is something wrong?" She asked innocently.

"That's it?" He did not sound like he was whining. He didn't whine, ever!

She gasped in mock shock. "Why Shikamaru I promised you a kiss and I've given you one. You weren't expecting anything **more** were you?"

He had seen Ino on many occasions play with a boy's emotions by leading him on to expect more than he was ever going to get. She would make a sport of lifting and then crushing his hopes. Shikamaru had always felt a very mild disdain for the boys who would let Ino do that to them. (Except for Chouji for whom he felt only sympathy.) He had always assumed that if they would only use their brains they would be able to see through the silly game and avoid all that troublesome emotional turmoil. But now he had to admit that for all his supposed genius he had just been played. Temari had most definitely won that round. Well the evening was still young. He took a couple deep breaths and let his heart beat slow.

"Of course not." He was glad that it actually sounded like he didn't care. He sat down next to Temari. The girl lifted a metal cover and put down a plate that was overwhelmed by a massive steak. He took out a knife and began cutting into it. After the first cut he looked over to her in surprise. "The meat is still red."

"It's pink, its medium rare, now try it you'll love it."

"I told you that I like my steaks well done."

She shook her head in mild disappointment. "I refuse to cook a delicious piece of meat like that until it's juiceless. Now try it."

"I like my steaks well done." He repeated.

She smiled sweetly, and pointed to a pair of doors behind her. "The kitchen is right over there you are free to cook it as long as you like."

Defeated he went back to cutting his steak. He took the first piece and popped it into his mouth and began to chew. Damn! Why did it have to be so good?

Temari waited until he'd swallowed. "Do you like it?"

It was easily the best piece of meat he had ever tasted. He wondered if there was any way he could get Temari to teach this to his mom. "It's not bad." He eagerly went back to cutting another piece.

"I knew you would like it." She turned her attention to her own steak.

He had never had a better meal either at home or in any restaurant. *Everything* she made was delicious. He had to admit (to himself but not to her) that she really was every bit as good at cooking as she was at fighting. The conversation had mostly centered around the upcoming Chunin exams that were to be held in Mist. Suna had already selected the seven teams that would attend, including hers. The situation was very different in Konoha. Following the attack they had suffered during the last exams there was now a strong sentiment to boycott these and rather hold a separate selection that would involve Leaf nins only. The council was pretty much split on the issue and Tsunade had yet to reach her decision. He personally suspected that the Hokage was leery of sending a large group of Genin so far from Konoha for an extended period.

"So what is your verdict on my cooking?" She began clearing the plates. She had been more than a little pleased to watch him devour that entire steak along with a plate full of side dishes.

He helped her gather the plates. "I am willing to admit you are a good enough cook for me to continue to consider you as a potential wife."

She laughed as she brought the plates to the kitchen. "Well that's a relief, now I have a special dessert. Why don't you go into the parlor and I will serve it to you there. Just go out that door and it's the first door on the right." He nodded and followed her directions.

The parlor was a simple room with a couple small leather couches and a plain oak table. He sat down on one of the couches and waited for her to bring in the dessert. It was only a few minutes before she walked in. She didn't have any food with her.

"Are you ready for dessert?" There was something different in her voice.

He nodded, sure he would love it whatever it was. "Where is it?"

Without another word she sat down on his lap and leaned into him. Her weight pushed him back into sofa. One arm she wrapped around his neck, with the other he felt a tug as she freed his hair to fall loose around his face. He could feel her breath coming in short rapid gasps as she leaned in close.

"I thought..." She put a finger to his lips.

"That first kiss was for my promise; this one is... just because."

She pressed her lips down on his. Her arms wrapped around his neck. His surrounded her hips and he pulled her closer. She was warm and sweet and as he kissed her he thought she tasted of fresh cherries. It was his first time and it was amazing. As they shared their very first kiss he could only think one thing.

Worth it.

A brother's promise

Author's Note: Thanks for all the reviews, I very much appreciate them. Having read them I thought I would take the time to share with you some of my perspectives. First off I agree Shikamaru **does** blush an awful lot and he and Temari **are** moving much faster in their relationship than would be expected. But I do have my reasons. When Shikamaru is in the hospital he basically confesses to Temari that he thought he knew what being a shinobi was, but that he was unprepared for the reality. Shikamaru is an interesting character at this age as he represents someone with vast knowledge and intelligence, but who is still lacking in experience. Keep in mind this is the first time he has ever had genuine romantic feelings for a girl. The fact that the feelings are being returned and by a girl like Temari I think excuses the occasional blush and quickening of the heart. As he gains experience he will not react as strongly, he will not blush as easily when he is say, 18. If you think about it in the series he is now 15 and **still** has had virtually no physical contact with the girl he cares for. So far as we know they have yet to kiss, hold hands or even hug. By comparison Naruto is constantly hugging or otherwise touching Hinata. So **of course** his reactions are different than what we see in the anime or manga. Just remember he is 13 and trying to understand what it means to be in love with someone.

As for them moving fast I agree they are. But I would point out that they are both shinobi, which means the rules are very different for them. As will be stated in a later chapter they both understand that death can come at any time and so time is precious. My second favorite couple is Naruto and Hinata and while I love her devotion in one aspect I find her actions difficult to understand. Naruto has come close to death more than once. Given that she should come to realize she is **not** guaranteed to have unlimited opportunities to share her feelings with him. (Any of you who have read my other story already know my thoughts on this.) Shikamaru and Temari both know their lives could end at any time and that knowledge spurs them to find what happiness they can. Also it is much easier to take

your time when you see the person every day. When you only have a few days or a week with someone, time with them becomes even more precious.

Those are my thoughts. Please continue to let me know what you think, and as always please enjoy!

Her eyes were closed as her lips melted into his. She could feel his strong hands run up and down her back she loved the feel of him responding to her, the feel of his desire for her. She had been a little scared and a little nervous. This was the first time she had ever kissed a boy and the thought she would do it wrong had panicked her. But oh, she wasn't doing it wrong, not by the way he was kissing her back.

They didn't stop. His lips never left hers, they just kept kissing. Somehow they ended up lying half on, half off the couch. She was still on top. His hands stroked her neck and she was amazed that they could be so strong and so gentle all at once. Her own hands explored, searched, they began to move to...

"Hey Temari is there anything to eat!" A loud shout from somewhere down the hall broke the spell. Her eyes burst open; they both started and ended up on the floor. He was staring at her in surprise and she was sure she had the same look.

"I think Kankuro is home." He said.

"I swear I will kill him."

"So do you think the rules of hospitality and his bet will keep him from punching me?" He sounded amused by the idea of her brother finding them in their current state.

She stood up. "Let's not find out." She took his hand. "Come on." She led him out the other entrance to the parlor. The first thing to cross her mind was how to sneak back over to the stairs and get him

to her room. But she quickly rejected that idea. She was *not* ready to invite him to her room. And even if she were they had a very firm rule that no guests were allowed to stay overnight. She took him instead down a different hallway.

"Do you always rush the boys you're kissing out of the house?"

She glared at him. "You are the only boy I have ever kissed, now shut the hell up."

"Really, well you are the only girl I have ever kissed."

Hearing him say that sent a thrill through her heart. *I'm his first!* "So you and Ino..."

"No."

A joyous smile covered her face. "You are never kissing anyone else." He laughed and the two of them continued running down the hall hand in hand.

They got out of the house by a side entrance and then hurried over to the gate.

"I'm sorry we got interrupted, but I will see you tomorrow." He simply nodded. "Good night." She turned to hurry back before Kankuro looked out a window. But Shikamaru had not let go of her hand. "Shikamaru I need to..."

He leaned in and kissed her. It was short but passionate. When he finished she could only look at him speechless. "Good night Temari." With that he walked away.

She stayed rooted to the spot watching him go until she could no longer see him. Then smiling to herself she half walked half skipped back to the front door, suddenly not caring in the least what Kankuro might say.

It was dark out and he was in a strange city but he had no real trouble finding his way back to the Inn. Going back to his suite all he could think about was her.

"How was your date?" He jumped at the sound of Ino's voice. He'd been about to unlock his door. She was standing in the hall outside her own open door. Naturally their suites were across from each other.

"Have you been staying up all this time waiting for me?"

She smiled. "It's only 10:30 Shikamaru and it's not as if I had anything better to do. So how was your date?"

"I wouldn't call it a date Ino, Temari just made dinner for me."

That caught her by surprise. "When you said you were having dinner with her I thought you meant at a restaurant. She cooked for you back at her place?"

"At her family home, yes."

"Uh-huh, and was anyone else there?"

"No."

"So you had dinner all alone with her at her place, that is pretty much the definition of a date. So how was it?"

"Fine."

She quirked an eyebrow, "Just fine?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "It was just dinner Ino."

"Uh-huh," she walked over to him. "I am going to just make three little observations. First you're walking around with your Chunin vest unzipped; you have never done that since you got the thing. Second you're wearing your hair down. I've known you your whole life and I

have seen you with your hair down exactly twice. Once during the shower incident when we were seven." They both shuddered. "And once when I saw you at the baths."

He looked at her in shock. "You were peeping on me!"

"Hey! Don't get all proud, we were ten and it was on a dare from Sakura."

"Pervert."

"Whatever! Anyway, my third observation," she took two fingers and swiped them across his lips.

"Hey!"

She displayed her finger tips to him. "This isn't your usual shade." He could feel her eyes literally boring into his skull. "So care to add anything?"

"No, I think I'll stick with, 'just dinner.'"

She smiled at him. "You do know I could always use one of my jutsus to just see for myself."

He smiled back. "You do know I still have that picture of you and Chouji at camp."

"You wouldn't!"

"Try me."

"Fine, good night Shikamaru."

"Good night Ino."

"You're humming again."

"Am I?" She looked over to her brother. "I hadn't noticed."

"So just what the hell happened last night?" Kankuro asked.

"We had dinner." She continued making the oatmeal.

"You just had dinner? You send all the servants home and practically push me and Gaara out the door and you expect me to believe that's all that happened?"

"So what happened to that girl who was in your room the other day? I noticed her clothes were a bit of a mess when she left."

He was blushing for all he was worth. "Nothing."

"Well what a coincidence, nothing happened with me and Shikamaru either."

"I would like to have a talk with him." Gaara said quietly.

Both his siblings looked at him in surprise. "Why?" Temari asked warily.

"He is obviously having a strong influence on you and I think I should know him a bit better."

She couldn't help it, she felt fear. "Gaara, please don't feel you have to act like the protective brother. I can deal with Kankuro, but I am afraid that you really will scare him off."

He looked directly at his sister. "If just talking to me does that then is he even worth your effort?"

"I will decide who is worth it."

"I still wish to talk to him. We have spoken a bit both before the finals of the exams and at his home. But I believe I should have a longer talk with him, in private."

"Are you going to threaten him?"

"I am merely going to speak with him about certain realities."

That was his way of saying yes. Gaara was always extremely polite (except when he was overcome by bloodlust) he could be courteous even as he crushed the life from someone's body. "Just what do you plan to say to him? That if he breaks my heart you will kill him?"

"I will merely inform him that it would not be wise to cause you any harm."

She looked at her younger brother and all the old terrors came rushing back to her. He had gotten so much better since the fight with Naruto, she had begun to actually relax and even joke around him. But you could not spend most of your life terrified of a person and simply forget, even if you forgave. "Gaara I want a promise from you. I know how you detest liars so I know you would never break a promise. Promise me that whatever happens, even if he does break my heart, that you will not hurt him."

"I have no wish to harm him Temari, however if it should become necessary I would."

"Gaara, if I really truly feel he needs to be hurt I will do it myself. But whatever happens, I want you to leave him alone."

He looked at his sister and it was clear he did not understand.

"Why?"

She looked at him sadly. "Because I know going into this that things might end up that way. Not because he wants to hurt me, but because of the circumstances. Relationships are hard." She gave Kankuro a glance. " *Real* relationships are hard even for normal people. We are shinobi and death and pain are our lot. I am not some naïve little girl who thinks every romance ends happily. I understand that things may not work out with him no matter how

much I want them to. Hell, given my life so far I should probably expect that."

"If you believe that then why are you seeing him?"

"Because there is a *chance* that we could be happy. I know it would be hard and I know there is no guarantee but if there is even the chance things could work between us it's worth the risk."

"I do not understand."

"I know." It broke her heart. "Gaara I beg you, promise me."

"Do you love him Temari?" Kankuro gaped at them.

She looked utterly miserable. "Yes," she answered in a small voice.

"Does he love you?"

She looked down at her feet. "I don't know."

There was silence then, the only sound was the oatmeal cooking on the stove.

"I give you my solemn word that whatever happens I shall cause Nara Shikamaru no harm."

She smiled and on a sudden impulse leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

She finished cooking breakfast and put it in the bowls. She was no longer humming.

An apology

She came at him all out. He slid back and blocked. "You're leaving yourself wide open." Her reply was to scream and press forward even harder. Side step, block, side step, block; he wasn't even trying to counterpunch. "You're fighting angry, reign it in." His words only seemed to make her more determined to hit him. "Fine then." He reached out and caught her left wrist as she tried to connect to his head. She was off balance and it was easy to pull her forward. He bent and sent her flying over his hip. She landed hard on her back. He had kept a hold of her wrist. In one motion he secured her left arm behind her head and placed a kunai at her throat. "You are dead."

She gave him a look. "Again."

"Enough! Your form is sloppy and your attacks are completely off balance. What do I always say about anger?"

She sat up. "Anger is a fine servant but a poor master." She quoted.

"I don't know what is going on but you clearly aren't focused on this. Any more training would be a waste of my time."

"Well I'm sorry if sparring with me isn't good enough for you."

"Not if all you're doing is working off some frustration." He shook his head. "What is going on Temari? First you beg me to give you time off, then you come pounding on my door wanting to train. Then all you do is come straight ahead at me like a first year student. I would expect better from you." She didn't reply she just sat there. "What is wrong?"

"Everything." She looked up at the clear sky.

He looked down at her. She was upset but he had no idea why. He sat down next to her. "Does this have anything to do with

Shikamaru?"

She kept looking up. "Do you think I deserve to be happy?"

"Happy? What do you mean?"

She looked at him. "I mean do I have any right to be happy sensei? Do I have any right to want something just for myself? My whole life has been devoted to others, to my village, my brothers, my bastard of a father..."

"Temari! Speak respectfully of the dead!"

"Why?" She demanded. "I called him a bastard when he was alive so I'll damn well call him one now that he's dead. If anyone has a right to it's me."

"I understand your feelings, but still show some respect; for all his faults he was a great man."

"He was a great leader and Kazekage." She corrected. "But I refuse to call any man who would not love his children great." Baki had no answer for that. "What I want to know is are we just tools or do we get to have our own lives? Is it selfish for me to want happiness just for myself?"

He took her words in. "I know very little about happiness myself Temari. I have known duty as a Suna shinobi since I was ten and I have always strived to follow the virtues and ways of the shinobi." She nodded. "There are those who say we are only tools to be used by those whom we serve. To a degree that is certainly true. Of all the virtues loyalty is the most precious one to a shinobi. But even though we are shinobi we are also human. You speak of happiness but I suspect you are also thinking of love. Whether or not it is selfish to love?" He looked at her, and she gave him a very slight nod. "To truly love means to put the needs of another above your own. In a sense when we face death in service to our village it is done out of love. For there is no greater love than to lay down all you have for another.

If that is what you feel, if you would gladly give everything for the sake of someone else then that is true love. And true love can never be selfish."

Without any warning she reached out and put him into a vice like embrace. "Thank you."

He was not one for emotional displays, but he gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. "You are welcome."

She let go of him and looked away as she quickly rubbed her eyes. "Do you still want to meet Shikamaru?"

"Now more than ever, if he can inspire such thoughts and feelings in you he must be quite an interesting fellow."

She laughed. "Interesting doesn't even begin to describe him." She stood up and so did he. "Let's go have lunch with the most interesting and laziest ninja on the face of the world."

There was a loud pounding on his door. He lifted his head off the pillow. "Go away!" He shouted.

"Shikamaru open this damn door right now or I swear I'm breaking it down!" He heard a familiar voice yelling.

He sat up and yawned. "Hold on I'm coming." He rolled out of bed and went to the door. When he opened it he found an impatient Temari standing there, arms crossed and foot tapping.

Her eyes grew at the sight of him. He was wearing the same shirt from last night and a pair of green boxers. "It's eleven what are you doing still not dressed?" She shouldered past him into the room.

"Come in." She scowled and he quickly shut the door. "I was sleeping." He explained.

"At eleven? I've been awake for five hours and three of them were spent doing taijutsu."

He yawned again. "I am usually not so energetic in the mornings." She smacked the side of his head. "Ow! What was that for?"

"You are a rude baka! Cover your mouth when you yawn it's just plain vulgar. I swear you are the laziest human being I have ever met in my life. Just *how* did you become a Genin, never mind a *Chunin*?"

"Bad karma?"

She shook her head. "Why do I put up with you? You are lazy, worthless, and completely unmotivated."

He smiled at her. "You left out handsome, charming, and wonderfully kissable." She smiled back, right before hitting him in the head again. "Ow!"

"You really want me to hit you today don't you?" She looked over and saw where the bedroom was and went into it. "Where are your clothes?"

"Hey what are you doing?"

She looked over to the chair where his clothes were piled. She looked at him and then pointed. "Do you see that wooden box with the shiny brass handles? That is called a *dresser*, clothes go in there." She went over to the chair and began picking through them.

"What are you doing?"

She picked out a clean shirt, pair of pants, and boxers and handed them to him. "Go take a shower. I want you clean and dressed in *ten* minutes so we can have lunch with my sensei."

He took the clothes she handed him and just stared at her as though she were a crazy woman. "Temari when did I say I would have lunch

with your sensei?"

She smiled sweetly and began reaching for her fan. "You've got nine minutes and forty five seconds left."

He mumbled something about, 'insane' and 'mom' but he did scurry over to the bathroom with the clothes she had picked out. When he came out nine minutes later his hair was still wet and his clothes damp, but he did look presentable. He was not surprised to find his bed made and his clothes no longer on the chair. He felt a cold shiver of fear. She had woken him up, made him shower and dress, and cleaned up his room... she really was acting like his mom. She was actually worse; his mom had never beaten him with an oversized fan.

"Well let's go." She was waiting by the door.

He went over to her, but suddenly stopped. "Oh, wait I forgot something."

"What?" She said in an exasperated tone.

"This." He took hold of the side of her face and leaned in for a kiss. He was happy to see the look of surprise on her, along with some pink color in her cheeks. "Too bad we're in such a rush." He said once he'd kissed her.

As he reached for the door she grabbed him by the front of his vest and shoved him hard against it. He was surprised; he hadn't expected the kiss to make her angry. She leaned her face into his. She had an evil grin that promised nothing but trouble.

"Five minutes." She said and pressed her mouth down on his in a rough kiss.

When they got downstairs Baki was sitting at a table sipping some tea. Looking up as the two of them approached he smiled. "I hope

you don't mind but I decided to sit down while I waited. It has been over half an hour."

Before Temari could think something up Shikamaru spoke. "I apologize. I was not dressed and I am afraid it takes me quite awhile to get ready. I am sorry for making you wait."

Baki was a Jonin and used to picking up on the slightest detail. He did not miss the guilty look that had flashed between the two of them. Or the slightly relieved expression Temari had possessed once Shikamaru completed his explanation. "I see, well no need to apologize since we had not planned to meet you are not late."

"Baki-sensei, may I present to you Nara Shikamaru of Konoha. Shikamaru this is Baki he has been my teacher and instructor since I was eight." Temari made the formal introductions.

Baki stood up and bowed. "I am most pleased to meet you Nara Shikamaru."

Shikamaru returned an equally respectful bow. "Thank you Baki-san. Temari has spoken of you often and I can tell she thinks a great deal of you."

A grin tugged at his lips. "Most of it good I hope. Please do not feel the need to be formal; you may simply call me Baki." He sat back down. "I haven't ordered yet, shall we go ahead and have lunch?"

They both sat down at the table and began looking at menus. They were both still deciding when a familiar shrill voice rang out.

"Shikamaru why didn't you tell us you were having lunch!" The three of them looked over to see two Leaf nins approach.

"Oh wonderful," Temari muttered under her breath.

"Hey Ino, hey Chouji." Shikamaru waved to his two friends. When they came over to the table he performed some quick introductions.

"Well how nice you're having lunch with her sensei. How sweet. Well Chouji and I were just about to have lunch as well." She paused.

All eyes went to Temari. Shikamaru raised an eyebrow. With an effort she screwed on a weak grin. "Would the two of you like to join us?"

"Thank you." Ino chirped. She sat down to Shikamaru's right, and Chouji sat down on hers. Temari sent the girl a frown. Ino sent a brilliant smile in return and absent mindedly put a hand on his arm. "So Temari how was your date last night?"

Shikamaru shut his eyes. "Troublesome," he muttered.

Chouji looked eager to hear more. Baki looked over to his student. "You had a date last night?"

She nodded to her sensei. "Well as you know hospitality demanded I invite him into my home. We had a very nice dinner and some pleasant conversation." She reached over and put her hand over his. She directed her attention to the other girl. "Shikamaru can be very fun once he relaxes."

"I'll just bet." Ino replied.

"Have you got something to say little girl?"

"Just wondering if you wear cherry red lipstick or if Shikamaru met *another* friendly girl on his way home."

Shikamaru jumped in before Temari could explode. "Chouji do you know she made a steak for dinner and it had to be at least 40 ounces."

Chouji's eyes expanded. "Really?" As Shikamaru had known he would his friend began asking Temari about the details of the dinner. During which he sent Ino an unhappy look which she shrugged off. He let out a sigh. This had started out as such a peaceful day, now he felt as if he were stuck between two opposing armies.

The lunch was interesting to say the least. Her sensei was actually trying to hold a conversation with him as he tried to mediate between the two girls who continued to snipe at each other. For his part Chouji mostly listened as he stuffed himself with barbecue. Near the end of the meal, as they were all sipping on their drinks Baki brought up a familiar topic.

"Shikamaru I am curious about something I have heard. Perhaps as a Chunin who is close to your Hokage you could shed some light for me."

"Well that all depends on what you wish to know." He answered warily, friendly or not he had to be careful what he said to shinobi from another village.

"The Chunin exams are coming up soon and we have received a list of competitors from the participating villages. We have yet to receive anything from Konoha."

It was Temari who actually answered. "Shikamaru and I talked about this last night. It seems their Hokage is considering boycotting this exam."

Baki looked astonished. "Is this true?"

"No decision has been made as yet, it is only a possibility." Shikamaru said.

"So your village intends to forgo selecting any Chunin?"

"As I understand it every Kage has the authority to appoint Chunin or Jonin at their own discretion."

"Of course, there are always some shinobi who are skilled but for whatever reason do not excel at the exams. Sometimes the competition is simply too brutal. And of course during war time the exams cannot be held. Still, participation in the Chunin exams is considered an important aspect of demonstrating respect and

friendship between the hidden villages. I remember your own Hokage speaking thus at the preliminaries of the last exam."

Shikamaru sent the man a cold look. "I remember the same speech, I also remember attending the Sandaime's funeral as well as getting ready to die as I faced eight Sound nins. Tell me Baki-san, as you stood there listening to the Hokage speak of friendship and respect did you already know you would betray us?"

The table was dead silent. Temari looked hurt, and his friends looked surprised that he could sound so passionate about something. Baki had no expression at all. Shikamaru honestly didn't know where that had come from. Perhaps some wounds just took longer to heal.

He stood up and bowed to Temari's sensei. "I apologize that was rude of me."

Baki then stood. "You do not need to apologize. You have every right to be angry at what took place. You are a Chunin of Konoha village and your loyalty does you only credit. And to answer your question, yes I knew." He bowed low. "And for that Nara Shikamaru I apologize to you." He then turned to Ino and Chouji, and bowed as low to each of them. "I apologize to each of you as well." He sat back down.

As Baki and Shikamaru sat Temari slowly came to her feet. She looked at him, he could see her distress. "I also knew Shikamaru. If it is worth anything to you I never wanted it, and I spoke against it when Baki first informed all of us."

"She did." Baki confirmed.

"Temari you don't..."

She bowed to him. "I apologize to you Shikamaru for my deceit. I ask only that you understand that it was the will of the Kazekage." She looked to the girl and bowed. "I apologize to you Yamanka Ino." She looked to the boy next to Ino and bowed. "I apologize to you Akimichi

Chouji." She looked back to Shikamaru. "Please excuse me I have to go." She did not wait for an answer as she fled the restaurant.

Shikamaru jumped to his feet. "Excuse me." He quickly followed her. Everyone else at the table simply watched.

Baki looked concerned. "I wonder if he will still take her to the festival tonight." He said to himself.

"Festival?" Ino asked.

"Temari wait!" She kept on walking. He finally caught up to her just outside the Inn. "Temari please wait." He took a hold of her wrist.

She stopped. "Do you hate me?"

"What?! No, of course not!"

"Are you sure?" She looked very unhappy. "If you feel that Baki betrayed you then so did I. Anything you believe him to be guilty of I am guilty of as well."

He stood before her and took both her hands into his. "I am not angry with Baki or you or anyone else here in Suna. I know that it was Orochimaru..."

She shook her head. "Orochimaru was a bastard and he was the one who convinced the Kazekage before murdering him. But the fact remains that the Kazekage *did* order the attack on your village. Even though I disagreed with it I obeyed the order." She looked at him intently. "What would you do if Tsunade declared war and ordered her army to invade Suna?"

He took a deep breath. "I would obey the order; I couldn't stand by and let my friends be in danger. But I would never be **your** enemy Temari; I would never try and hurt you. If the Hokage ordered that I would refuse."

She squeezed his hands. "I know that, and I would never be yours."

He tried to smile. "We're allies now, so this shouldn't be a concern."

"We were allies before. I truly don't believe that anyone here would start another war with Konoha. But the shinobi world is a shadowy one with very few absolutes."

"I know about shadows Temari, but some things are still certain even if they are hidden."

"Such as?"

"My feelings for you."

She leaned forward and pressed the side of her face against his. "This is never going to be easy for us is it?"

"No, but we knew that from the beginning."

She saw the stares of people passing by. "I want to be alone with you." She whispered to him.

He felt a shiver. "Well I have a place." He glanced to the Inn. She nodded and the two of them went back inside.

"Chouji you're taking me dancing tonight."

"I am?" He looked at her in surprise.

"You are."

A shopping trip

"Oh I love these!" She pointed to a pair of silver earrings in the shape of crescent moons.

"Ino what are we doing here?" Chouji asked plaintively, he *hated* shopping.

"I told you we are going to a dance tonight and I didn't bring anything to wear."

"Neither did I."

"You're a boy." Obviously that explained everything.

"If you want to buy a dress why are you looking at jewelry?"

She sent him a look of mild frustration. "Chouji how many times have I told you shopping is all about the hunt!"

He just shook his head and had another potato chip. Why did he always do this? He always let her drag him on these shopping sprees.

"Where are all the price tags?" She looked at the man smiling at her from behind the counter. "How much?" She pointed at the earrings she wanted.

"For you sweet lady I have a special low price of just 250 ryu."

Before she could say anything Chouji was standing at her side and inspecting the earrings. "You must be joking, at the very most they might be worth 100."

Ino looked at him in complete surprise and was about to ask what the hell he was doing when he whispered in her ear. "Trust me." She stared at him, but kept quiet.

The shopkeeper noted the exchange and focused his attention on Chouji. "I see you have a discerning eye young sir. Very well I will lower my price to 230 ryu, but that is the absolute lowest I would be willing to go."

Chouji examined the earrings yet again. "Is that real silver?"

" What?!"

Twenty minutes of passionate argument later the two of them walked away from the stall with the earrings and 140 fewer ryu. "All right what was all that about?" Ino asked still somewhat amazed at how he had saved her so much cash.

"Haggling," he said and opened a fresh bag of chips.

"Huh?"

"It's a tradition here in Suna that when you go to the market you can bargain with the shopkeepers over the price. Haven't you noticed?" He waved to the other stalls where people were having animated, 'discussions.' "Some merchants sell at a set price, but if you don't see a price tag that means it's open to negotiation and they expect you to haggle. That guy back there saw your headband and was trying to take advantage of you."

Ino looked suitably impressed. "How did you know about it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Our dads came here a couple times on missions. Didn't your dad ever tell you about it?"

She looked a bit guilty. "He tells a lot of stories."

"You should try and listen to them, they're good stories and you can learn a lot from them."

She smiled at him. "Well thanks for watching out for me Chouji." She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. He began to blush immediately. *This is why I always let her drag me shopping.*

"I am always happy to watch out for you Ino-chan." He said quietly.

She nodded cheerfully. "Come on; let's see what other bargains we can find!" She reached out and took a firm hold of his meaty hand. The crowd was thick and she didn't want them getting separated. She had no trouble dragging the much larger boy along in her wake. She of course did not notice the blush on his face get just a tad darker as they struggled through the crowd hand in hand.

For a new concept Ino took to haggling like a fish to water. She was used to arguments and having to bend others around to her point of view. The fact she could combine her natural aggressiveness with her favorite activity only made it that much more fun for her. Chouji simply stood back and felt sorry for the poor merchants who were on the wrong side of her temper. He had indeed been shopping with her many, many, *many* times before and was used to being weighed down with bags. He was also not surprised that the dress that had been the original purpose of this trip was the very last thing she bought. In the end she had found exactly what she had wanted, she even managed to talk the shop keeper all the way down from 320 ryu to just 175. Unfortunately by this point she only had 90 left. He knew what that meant.

She turned her big blue eyes towards him and gave him the, 'puppy dog,' look she had perfected by age 5. "Chouji-kun could you help me pretty please?"

He shook his head. She always did this and he always let her. "Sure." He reached into his shirt and pulled out a small wad of bills. He peeled off a pair of 50 ryu notes.

She slunk over to him and let a couple fingers rub up and down his arm. "Could I have just a little more in case I want to stop and get something to drink?" She said in that pleading helpless little girl voice.

Shika is right I am so completely whipped. He damn well knew that if they did stop to get a drink he'd be the one paying for that too. Nevertheless he pulled off another 50 ryu note and handed it to her. "Of course."

"Thank you Chouji-kun!"

They were soon on their way back. Ino was in fine spirits, she'd had a wonderful afternoon. As for Chouji he was honest enough with himself to admit that despite spending hours at an activity he loathed and being 150 ryu lighter despite getting nothing for himself, he had also enjoyed it. He looked at the girl who was walking with her arm around his and talking excitedly about how she would accessorize what she'd bought. He knew why he put up with all of it of course. It was because he loved spending time with her, even if he had to listen to her lecture on the comparative value of open versus close toed shoes. He knew he would do just about anything to spend time with her.

He knew her well and realized she wasn't perfect. She had a tongue that could cut meat from bone and her temper was a frightening thing when fully unleashed. She thought too much about appearance and not enough about what was underneath. Yet despite all that he knew she was a good person. She played games sometimes and loved to tease and taunt, but she was *never* deliberately hurtful. He knew that she truly cared about him just as she cared about Shikamaru, and just as he cared for both of them. His favorite day of the year was always his birthday. On that day he got to have all of her attention. She helped plan his party, she always gave him the best gift, and she would spend the whole day giving him hugs and kisses on the cheek. She could be just so *wonderful* sometimes that he was always able to forgive the times when she wasn't. She could be hurtful with her criticisms about his weight and appearance, but she would rip into any girl who said something about him in her hearing. Whenever he thought about girls he always compared them to Ino, and he always found them lacking.

As they walked he wondered what she would say if he told her he had feelings for her, feelings beyond friendship. He had never seriously considered it before since it was painfully clear she was only interested in a certain self absorbed, 'genius.' But since Sasuke's betrayal she had stopped talking about him. For the first time since he had started having these feelings he thought there just might be some hope for someone who was not an Uchiha. But usually just as he would begin to get up the courage to ask her out on a real date she would start in on how he was too fat to land a pretty girl and how he needed to diet. That *always* hurt. She had seen his parents and all the rest of his family. They were *all* big boned; all the family jutsus were based on having excess calories to convert over to chakra. When she would tell him he needed to lose weight what he heard was that he needed to reject his entire family and their way of life. He had never tried to explain to her that if she suddenly gained 30 or 40 pounds he would not stop liking her. In fact given his tastes in women he thought some extra weight would make her look *better*. He knew better than to ever tell her that. If she ever heard him suggest she should try and gain weight he was certain he would end up in the hospital.

"Lemonade!" She shouted and pointed at a small stand just ahead. "Let's stop and get some!"

He smiled at her. She didn't mention him paying; they just both knew he would. "Sounds good."

She gave him a quick hug. "Thanks for coming with me Chouji, you're the best."

"Anytime," when it came to her he would gladly take whatever he could get.

They were on the couch. She was lying on top of him asleep, her head resting on his chest. One hand kept running through her soft golden hair. He enjoyed just laying there, feeling that comfortable warmth. He listened to her breathing and it put him at ease. He

looked at her calm face and felt completely at peace. This was so much better than watching clouds.

He looked at the clock. Unfortunately it was time. With his other hand he gently stroked her cheek. "Temari wake up."

He watched as her eyes slowly opened. "What?"

"It's 4 o'clock." He replied simply.

She looked over to confirm. "So it is." She slid off him and sat up stretching her arms. She looked at him with a mildly surprised expression. "I can't believe I just slept for an hour." She covered her mouth and yawned.

He sat up as well. "Naps are always good."

She playfully poked his ribs. "Your laziness is rubbing off on me." She picked up the hair ties that were sitting on the small table in front of them. She handed him two of them and turned her back slightly. "Here help me put my hair up."

"Why don't you wear it down?"

She smirked at him. "Well to use your favorite word long hair is too *troublesome* in the desert."

"So you'll wear it down the next time you visit me?"

She gave him a slight grin. "Well *if* I visit you I'll consider it. You know if you like long hair so much why do you wear yours up?"

"Family tradition," he replied simply.

"Well I'll tell you what, next time we're together in Konoha I'll wear my hair down if you wear yours." She wasn't about to mention how sexy she thought he looked with all that long hair down around his face.

"Deal."

Once her hair was tied up again she was soon at the door getting ready to leave. "Remember I want you at my home by 7, do you remember how to get there or should I send Tanya over?"

"I know how to get there." He leaned into her and they shared a lingering kiss.

When it finally ended she gave him a smile, a quick good bye and *hurried* out the door before she was tempted to stay and continue kissing him.

A dance

"So after kissing him you fell asleep in his arms?" Tanya was practically squealing.

Temari smiled into the mirror at Tanya's reflection. "That's right, and then he woke me up and gave me another looong kiss before he would let me go."

Tanya let out a sigh. "That is so romantic."

"Yeah it is." Temari couldn't help it she actually giggled like a... well 16 year old girl.

She had never had any real friends. Outside of her brothers and her sensei no one was allowed to be close. She had of course a very large number of social acquaintances. She knew many girls her age from the six Houses and from the other shinobi squads. But there really was no one she could call friend. But even being as driven and focused as she was, she did occasionally long for some simple girl talk. One of the more pleasant surprises of her time in Konoha had been the few hours spent with Nara Yoshino in her home. It had been so refreshing to talk with an intelligent woman who cared nothing about her name or family. They had just been two women talking about things (mostly Shikamaru) and she'd enjoyed it thoroughly. Temari had lost her mother a long time ago. Having tea in Yoshino's kitchen it had felt like she was with her mom again, at least a little.

Temari's normal answer when she felt the need to actually talk with a fellow female was to have one of her maids comb her hair. As the girl did this the two of them would relax and talk for a bit. When there were no visitors around the servants dropped the, 'sama' nonsense and things were actually rather casual. Well around her and Kankuro at least. Gaara was still not comfortable with casual conversation

and preferred to be formal even in his own home. Tanya was in her room now combing out her hair and helping her get ready for tonight.

"So did he try anything, well, inappropriate?" Tanya asked.

"Well when we started kissing on the sofa he did suggest we'd be more comfortable on the bed."

Tanya gasped. "What did you do?"

Temari laughed. "I hit him on the head and told him to get any dirty thoughts out of his mind."

Tanya laughed as well. "You know you seem to hit him a lot are you ever afraid you're accidentally going to hurt him?"

"No, he's a boy so he has a thick skull. If I *do* hurt him it *won't* be an accident."

Tanya laughed again and continued brushing Temari's hair.

There was a knock on the door. As soon as he answered it Ino slid into his room.

"So did Temari get really mad at you for what you said and tell you she was never speaking to you again?"

"No." He replied.

"Figures, just so you know Chouji and I are going to the festival tonight. Not that I heard anything about it from **you** of course."

"I'm sorry Ino it must have slipped my mind."

"Uh-huh, that seems to be happening to you a lot lately."

"If I had told you it just means you would be even more troublesome than you are now. Besides," he reached over and tapped her hitai-

ite. "We're all adults aren't we?"

"We're also *friends* right? Friends and teammates are supposed to trust each other."

"Then trust me." He said simply.

"Fine, but if you want to talk to someone about how things are going with you and the amazon you know you have someone who will listen."

"I know it's good to have Chouji here."

She glared at him. "Baka!" He held the door open as she left.

"Is it just me or is everyone staring?"

She smiled at him and walked just a bit closer, their hands held. "Of course they're staring, it's not every day they get to see the luckiest man in all of Suna."

He sent her an amused look. "Lucky?"

"Well you are going to the festival with me aren't you? How much luckier could a man get?" He rolled his eyes at her but his playful expression made her laugh.

As they were walking towards the festival grounds the streets were getting more and more crowded. The truth was people *were* staring at them. To Temari that was nothing new, but the looks on the faces were. The usual signs of respect and admiration were largely replaced by surprise or by confusion. She knew why of course, but she was not going to bring it up. She was going to enjoy tonight. She was going to dance with the boy she cared for and she was not about to let some looks from some strangers ruin it.

As they came up on the festival grounds she could already hear the band getting set to begin. The grounds were nothing more than a vacant flat stretch of earth that was set aside just for public events. The perimeter was surrounded by lamps that were already lit though the sun was still in the sky. There were stands set every few paces selling food and drink. In the very center a temporary stage had been set up and she could see the musicians getting ready. Those who wanted to dance had already begun drifting closer to the stage, while those who were happy to watch and listen were closer to the outskirts and stalls. Still holding his hand she plunged into the middle of the crowd.

"Couldn't we get something to drink first?" He asked.

"Later, we came here to dance."

"Didn't you say the festivities would last until the early morning? Maybe we should pace ourselves."

She sent him a dark look. "You've been asleep all day lazy; you should have plenty of energy. Are you trying to say you don't want to dance with me?" The way she was looking at him promised swift and painful death if she got the wrong answer.

"No!" He said fervently. "It's just dancing isn't really my thing."

"And just what is your thing again? I forget is it sleeping or playing shogi?"

He looked a bit nervous. "I'm just not very good at dancing, that's all."

She gave him a gentle smile and a slight squeeze of his hand. "Don't worry; just do what everyone else does. As long as you're the one dancing with me I'll be happy."

He sent her a relieved smile. "Just remember you said that if people start to point and laugh."

She smirked. "They do that now; it's just usually because of your hair."

"Hey!"

Fortunately the band chose that moment to finally begin. He took a quick look around at what everyone else was doing. Mimicking what he saw he put one hand on her hip and used the other to hold her hand out. They danced apart, but not too far. They moved slowly to the music, he was glad to see there didn't seem to be any formal dance steps. After the first minute or so he began to relax and started to actually enjoy dancing with his beautiful Temari.

"Do you see them anywhere?"

"No, it's a big crowd." There was a stand not ten feet away selling skewers with roasted meat. The delicious aroma was making his mouth water. "Let's get something to eat." He tried to get to the food, but Ino had a death grip on his arm.

"Let's get closer to the stage." With surprising strength she pulled him in that direction and away from the stall.

"Ino couldn't we..."

"No, we just had dinner an hour ago."

"But it smells so *good*. " He whined.

"Later," she barked at him. "Now keep your eyes open."

"Why are we spying on Shikamaru anyway?"

"We're not spying we're just looking out for him." She was frustrated it really was a very big crowd. She actually thought about using one of her jutsus to try and look for him. But she decided that using a

jutsu in a foreign village might not be the best of ideas. She was still trying to weave through the crowd as the music began.

She turned to Chouji. "We'll keep looking while we dance." He just nodded and placed his hands as he took the lead. Ino relaxed a bit and smiled up at her teammate. Most people would never guess it but Chouji was actually a wonderful dancer. And unlike a certain annoying Chunin he never complained about dancing with her.

Seeing the way she was smiling at him Chouji could feel himself blushing a bit. Maybe he could wait awhile to eat again.

Gaara stood patiently watching the dance from the outskirts of the crowd. People were very careful to show him respect and keep a polite distance. Thus he was a bit of an, 'island,' in a sea of happy folk. It didn't bother him as he was used to it and frankly preferred it to having others crowd in close to him. He had been trying to change his image with the populace of Suna since returning from the fight with Naruto. He thought he was making a little headway, but it was hard to change so many minds. Yet he knew he would keep trying. Whether people acknowledged it or not he *had* changed thanks to Uzumaki's words and actions. He was willing to do whatever it would take to win over the respect of his fellow citizens.

Being an island in a sea made him stand out and easy to find. An old man approached him; a pretty young girl trailed a few steps behind him. The man was dressed in loose trousers and dress shirt, his clothes were pristinely white. His face was worn and carried all 70 of his years, but the russet eyes were still sharp, as was the mind behind them. The girl was no older than 11 or 12 and had her black hair in a simple pony tail. Her dress was of finest cream colored silk but of simple cut. As she trailed behind her eyes were cast down. Her image seemed to scream out, 'innocent virgin sacrifice.'

The man stood a couple steps before him and offered Gaara a deep formal bow. "Gaara, it is good to see you again."

Gaara returned the bow. "You as well Sulamon."

"I thought it was time for you to finally meet my granddaughter, this is Alysa." He nodded to the young girl.

She approached Gaara and gave him a cautious bow. "I am most pleased to meet you Gaara-sama." Her words and her tone were perfect and had obviously been drilled into her. Gaara however was an expert at spotting fear. He had no trouble noticing the tiny quiver in her fingers or the look of terror she tried to hide in her eyes.

He returned her bow. "I am also pleased to meet you Alysa-sama." He did not resent her in the least for being afraid of him. He knew his reputation was fearsome and had been well earned.

"My granddaughter has looked forward to meeting you for sometime now. I thought this festival would be the perfect opportunity for the two of you to get to know each other."

Gaara saw the slight twitch of Sulamon's hand and Alysa immediately offered him a shy smile. "Gaara-sama I would be so deeply honored if you would dance with me."

"Perhaps another time." He replied simply.

A very slight frown touched the old man's lips. He turned to his granddaughter. "Well, it seems you will have to wait to have Gaara honor you with a dance." The girl looked at him hopefully. "That being the case you are free to enjoy the festival with your friends while I speak further with Sabaku no Gaara."

She gave him a look of pure relief. "Thank you grandfather!" He lifted an eyebrow. "I mean, thank you Sulamon-sama." He shook his head but smiled at her.

Leaning down he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "It is all right, go and play." With a genuine smile the girl left. He turned back to Gaara. "It is a weakness, but I love my family."

Gaara nodded, he could understand. "She is afraid of me you know."

"That will pass with time." He replied simply. "You should get to know her a bit she is a very sweet child, very kind and open."

"In that case I trust she is not being trained as a shinobi."

He shook his head. "There are enough shinobi in my clan; she will have a different future. She will make someone an excellent wife."

"She will also serve as an excellent chord with which to tie someone to House Ossama."

"You make that sound like such a terrible thing, as if someone were being tied to a stake in the deep desert."

"I merely make an observation."

"Do you find her displeasing?"

Gaara shook his head. "I do not know her well enough to find her pleasing or displeasing."

"That would be easy to change. She can be made available to you to have dinner at any time you like. She is a fine cook and an excellent conversationalist. You might come to enjoy her company. What if you were to come and join us for dinner tomorrow?"

"Perhaps another time."

He looked at the young man in disappointment. "Are you rejecting my offer?"

"No, I am merely not interested in forcing my company upon someone who is afraid of me."

"The last time we spoke you told me you would make great sacrifices to become Kazekage and protect Suna. Has that changed?"

"No."

"Then why do you hesitate? With Sabaku and Ossama united the other Houses will fall into line. Let me kiss your cheek and call you my grandson and I shall bow to you and call you my Kazekage."

"For a price."

"Everything has a price, is mine so high or unreasonable? I helped your father ascend the throne and I could do the same for you. All I ask in return is what your father gave me."

"To be chief advisor and head of the Council of Wind."

He nodded. "I was the Kazekage's strongest supporter."

"He never completely trusted you."

"He never completely trusted anyone that is what made him such an effective leader. Yet he *did* seek my opinion on matters of state and often followed my advice."

"I am still considering the offer, but I do not wish to be with someone who fears me."

"Is *that* your concern? As I said that will change over time, it is not as though you could marry her immediately at this age you are both far too young. All I require is the betrothal, that is enough to tie our two Houses together. Once that is done you can put off the actual marriage for as long as you like, indefinitely if you wish."

"You would have your granddaughter remain alone for an untold number of years? I thought you loved your family."

"I *do* love my family, but each member must be ready to make a sacrifice for the greater good of the clan."

"I shall consider it."

He shrugged. "There is no rush a new Kazekage is unlikely to be chosen for another year or more." He looked at the crowd. "Is that not Temari?"

After three songs the musicians stopped for a bit. Apparently the intermission was expected as some couples moved onto the dancing area as a few moved off. As the two of them waited for the music to start again Shikamaru felt a light tap on his shoulder. He turned to see a Suna Jonin perhaps 17 or 18 with blonde hair and blue eyes towering over him. He was smiling at Temari.

"I beg your pardon, but may I cut in?"

Shikamaru was about to respond with a loud, 'hell no,' when Temari answered him in a clear and friendly tone. "I am sorry Senya, but I am afraid all my dances are already reserved. I would appreciate it if you would inform the others."

His jaw dropped in a rather comical look of surprise. His eyes shot from Temari to Shikamaru and back again. But he quickly regained his composure and gave them both a polite nod. "I see," his eyes did a swift examination of Shikamaru looking him up and down. "Well then if you will excuse me." He backed away and swiftly departed.

Shikamaru watched him go back to a group of about four other men. "Ex-boyfriend?"

Temari gently took hold of his face and turned it back to her. "No, current suitor."

"So are all of them suitors as well?"

She sighed. "Yes and I am sure we will be interrupted again at least a few more times tonight. I would normally not come with anyone and I would let them all get at least one dance with me. He didn't mean anything he just presumed that I was only going to have one dance with you."

"I see, well I don't mean to cause trouble if you prefer..."

"Don't even think about it lazy, you don't get to squirm out of this so easily." The music began again, this time it was slower and a bit more somber. She moved closer and put her head on his shoulder as they began to stir again. "Don't worry about anyone else, I am yours tonight." Hearing that he put his arms around her and decided to just hold her close.

Chouji felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see a young boy perhaps a couple years older than him standing there. He had dark brown eyes and long black hair. "I beg your pardon but might I have a dance with the lovely lady?" Chouji just looked at him, not really sure what to say. But Ino was kind enough to solve that for him.

"Of course!" She let go of Chouji's hand and walked over to the smiling young man. "You don't mind do you Chouji?"

Not really waiting for an answer she turned to the fellow and introduced herself. He in turn kissed her hand and gave her his name. Ino smiled at him in delight. The music began again and the two of them began to slow dance.

Chouji in the meanwhile just stood there forgotten and invisible. As everyone around him began to dance he finally got away. He went over to the stall he had originally wanted to visit and bought three skewers of meat. He then stood there with the other onlookers looking at the dancers, or rather at one dancer. The meat grew cold as he watched Ino blissfully in someone else's arms.

Sulamon had watched the surprising scene play itself out. He turned to Gaara. "Is your sister angry with my grandson for some reason? Why did she refuse a dance?"

"It has nothing to do with him. She simply prefers to dance with Shikamaru."

"That would be the name of the fellow she is dancing with now?" Gaara merely nodded. "From the color of his Jonin vest he is a foreigner I take it."

"He is from Konoha and he is Chunin not Jonin."

He lifted an eyebrow. "She prefers the company of a Leaf Chunin to that of my grandson?"

"It would seem so."

"I presume he is a suitor for Temari's hand?" Again Gaara simply nodded. "Does she intend to dance with him exclusively?"

"I did not ask, but whether she does or not is her concern."

He looked at Gaara warily. "It could become your concern if she is perceived to be too friendly with him."

Gaara looked directly at Sulamon. "It is her decision, Kankuro and I have given our blessing. In any case Sulamon it is *none* of your concern."

"I see." He said nothing more, but did continue to watch the young couple very carefully.

A garden

The previous night had been very interesting, but he had enjoyed it. Normally he didn't like dancing with girls. Typically Ino had to guilt him into dancing with her or one of her friends and he would always sneak away at the first opportunity. But for once he'd found dancing with a girl to be anything but troublesome. When Temari was in his arms everything just felt right. They had danced all night, and when the last song was over and it was time for him to walk her home it seemed too soon.

There had been some other highlights to the evening. As she had predicted they had been interrupted no less than *five* times by men wanting to dance with her. He was a bit shocked to see how much older some of her suitors were as two of them were easily old enough to be her father. Temari had explained to him that it was not considered unusual. Each time he'd felt just a bit bothered, he didn't like other guys coming over and trying to take his girl away from him. He wasn't jealous of course, he would *never* be jealous just because someone wanted to dance with Temari.

During the dance they had spotted Kankuro several times. Sometimes he was with a blonde and at other times he was with a brunette. They had spotted Gaara as well; he had not danced but had simply watched from the crowd. They hadn't spoken with either of her brothers. Near the end of the evening he had spotted Chouji. He and Temari had gone over to speak with him before the end of the festival. His friend was obviously unhappy, and it hadn't been hard to piece together why. He'd asked about Ino and Chouji had pointed into the crowd. He'd spotted Ino in what looked like a new dress dancing with a blonde haired boy. Chouji mentioned she had been dancing all night with three different boys. He knew of course about his friend's feelings for their teammate. He'd patted him on the back and tried to tell him that it was just a dance, he had seen Ino dance with other boys before. Temari'd had a strange look on her

face and had asked if Chouji would like a dance with her. But Chouji had preferred to just stay where he was.

When he had finally gotten her home they'd shared a good night kiss at the gate and she had told him to come back over at noon so they could have lunch. So here he was approaching the Sabaku complex holding some flowers in one hand and a package with a red bow on it in the other. As with his other visits there were no guards at the gate. He had strolled to the front door where he'd knocked and been allowed in by a servant. He was expected and was asked to wait in a room near the door as they found Temari.

"Well look who it is."

Shikamaru nodded politely. "Hello Kankuro."

"So let me guess, you're here to see my sister." He crossed his arms and gave Shikamaru a hard look. "You know punk you are nowhere near good enough for my sister. If I'd known she was thinking about anything more than a having a little fun with you I never would have given my blessing."

"Then I suppose it's fortunate you're not that perceptive."

Kankuro frowned at him. "You know I really don't like you."

"That's all right I really don't care." Shikamaru answered blandly.

"You know punk if you don't watch that mouth of yours I'm going to make you regret it."

"Temari told me about the terms of the bet you lost."

"I don't *need* to hit you; I have plenty of other ways to make your life miserable."

Shikamaru smirked at him. "So do I." He reached into his vest pocket and produced a photograph which he handed to Kankuro.

He looked at it. "What the hell?" It was of him bowing while looking like a Shika clone. "How the hell did you get this?"

Like a magician Shikamaru made a razor thin camera perhaps two long appear and then disappear. "Having grown up with Ino I've learned to appreciate the value of good blackmail material. It makes life much less troublesome. You can keep that by the way, I have the negatives. Keep that in mind or your sister gets them."

Kankuro paled visibly and nodded as he quickly tore the picture up.

He held out the package with the bow. "But in any case this is for you."

"You think you can buy me off with some cheap piece of crap? Pathetic."

Shikamaru lifted an eyebrow. "As I said I don't care what you think. This gift isn't from me."

Now the boy with the make up looked interested. "Whose it from?"

"Kiba, when he heard I was coming here he asked if I would deliver this to you along with an invitation to come and stay with his family the next time you're in Konoha. It was troublesome but I agreed."

"Kiba? Well him I actually like." He took the package and ripped it open. Inside was an ornate bottle with brown liquid. Kankuro took a close look at the label and his jaw dropped. " **Holy Crap!** "

Shikamaru looked at him. "I take it it's a good gift."

Kankuro continued to stare at the bottle he was holding. "Do you know what this is?"

"No idea."

"This is Black Label scotch, it's the best in the whole world and this bottle is **seventy years old!** I told Kiba when I was carrying him

back to Konoha that it's my favorite liquor. But how the hell did he get this? Scotch this old is impossible to buy you can't find it anywhere for any price."

"Well the Inuzuka clan is known to have a very large private stock of spirits. I presume it came from the collection. Since it's so rare you will want to save it for a special..."

Kankuro twisted off lid and brought the bottle to his mouth. He took a healthy swig before pulling it back and coughing. When the boy was done coughing his face was a bright crimson but he was smiling.

"Kiba buddy! The next time we get together we are going to so party." The boy looked over to Shikamaru. "Now why couldn't sis have fallen in love with him instead of you?"

Shikamaru's eyes exploded from his skull and he thought his heart might have stopped. "What?! What did you say?"

Kankuro hadn't meant say that, but seeing the Leaf nin's reaction he decided it was a good slip. "See you later punk." He took a second swig and left.

Shikamaru wanted to grab a hold of the doll user and shake him until he admitted whether or not that last comment had been serious. He found it very hard to believe that Temari would admit such feelings to Kankuro. But then he was her brother, they were bound to be close. Then again it was clear to see that Kankuro might just be having some fun with him. Either way he doubted he could get any kind of straight answer from him.

It was about ten minutes later when the most beautiful girl in the whole world walked into the room. She had on a simple light blue sundress and was carrying a large picnic basket in both hands. She smiled at him, and he knew this would be a good day.

"Hey Shika, I'm sorry I kept you waiting. I was just getting our lunch packed up."

He reached over to take the basket, and unlike last time she let him. "Did you make your chicken?"

She gave him a pleased look. "Of course, since our last picnic went so well I thought we could have another."

"Well I'm sure the food will be great and I couldn't ask for better company." He let out a small sigh. "But a picnic just isn't the same without grass to lie on and clouds to look at."

She gave him a little grin. "Well Shikamaru I'm afraid I can't do anything about clouds in the desert but there *is* a spot with some grass you can lie on."

He looked interested. "Really? I thought Suna didn't have any parks."

She shook her head. "It doesn't, at least not like the ones you have in Konoha. We do have monuments that are open to the public but none of those have grass. In case you haven't noticed we are in a desert. People don't waste water here, especially not for esthetics."

"So what is this place?"

"Come on you'll see." She took him down the hall away from the front door.

"Is it very far?"

She chuckled. "Well not *too* far, hopefully you have enough energy to make it."

She took him all the way through her house and then out a back door. When he stepped outside again he suspected he knew where they were going. Outside the back door there was a paved walkway that led to a circular brick enclosure. It was about twenty yards from the back of the house. It was a wall about the same height as the outer wall and made of the same colored bricks. As he got closer he judged that that it had a diameter of about ten yards. The path led to

what seemed like a solid iron door with a large brass handle. He noticed there were sheets of paper covering the wall; he thought they were messages of some sort. When they got closer he saw what they really were.

He stopped dead in his tracks. "Temari are those explosive notes?"

"Yes they are."

"There must be hundreds of them!"

She nodded. "About three hundred actually, I had them all connected by chakra strings so if one goes they all go."

He stared at her with an open mouth. "Woman you've got enough explosive here to level a building!"

She got a hold of his arm and got him moving again. "Relax it's perfectly safe. They are connected to a special warding jutsu that will only go off if someone tries to go through, over, or under the wall or tries to cut the strings. I'm the only one who can deactivate the jutsu so I'm the only one who can go inside."

"What could be so important that you would go to so much trouble?"

"I'll show you." She said happily. They got to the door and she ran through about a dozen hand signs. There was an audible, 'chunk,' and she reached out to open the door. Just before going inside though she looked back at the house. Looking at the second story she spotted him at one of the windows and waved.

"Damn it! That is so not fair!" He shouted like a child that had just been put in the corner.

"Is something wrong?" Gaara approached his older brother.

Kankuro waved to the window. "Just look!"

Gaara reached the window just in time to see Shikamaru enter and the door close behind him. "She has invited Shikamaru into her garden." He looked at Kankuro. "So?"

"So?" Kankuro looked hurt. "She has never invited **me** in there and I'm her brother."

Gaara allowed his lips to twitch perhaps a quarter of an inch. "It's not as though she invites everyone. So far as I am aware Baki and I are the only ones ever allowed inside."

"And Shikamaru," he said petulantly. "Why does she let him in but not me?"

"She probably does not believe *he* will step on her flowers. If you had not done that she probably would not have gone to the trouble of putting a wall around it to begin with."

"I was seven!"

"And you have matured so much since."

"Hey I am mature now I don't do childish stuff anymore!"

Gaara stared at him. "You eat the chocolates from her admirers."

He dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "I'm doing her a favor; everyone knows chocolates make you break out."

"Yes I always think what a thoughtful brother you are when I see you shoveling a handful of candy into your mouth."

Kankuro looked back out the window again. When he spoke it was with a more serious tone. "Gaara what do you think of all this? She says she loves him, she dances with him for the whole festival, and now she invites him into her secret garden. Things are getting serious."

"I know, Sulamon was asking about it last night. One of the people she turned down for a dance was his grandson."

"Well that's just great." He muttered. "Gaara what are we supposed to do if he asks her to marry him?"

"He is only 13; he cannot marry her for sometime yet."

"What would you say though?"

Gaara looked out the window. The garden was the one place he could not look into. He had experimented once sending his third eye. His chakra had tripped the jutsus and the whole thing had blown up. Fortunately he had been experimenting when Temari was out of the house. He found himself wanting to know what was going on. "I do not know yet. Shikamaru and I really do need to have that talk."

"Wow, this is beautiful."

She smiled at him. "I am glad you like it." Inside the wall were a dozen palm trees. Their green leaves stretched out and formed a green canopy overhead blocking out most of the harsh sun. Throughout the area were shrubs all with different colored flowers in bloom. And just as she had promised there was thick grass covering the ground. With the shade it was much cooler and felt more like a typical summer day in Konoha as opposed to a vast oven.

He spotted some white flowers and went over to take in their sweet scent. "Jasmine, like the flowers I brought you."

"Thank you for those, normally I get roses."

"I'll get you roses next time."

She shook her head. "No, I like the flowers you picked for me."

He smiled. "I got them because they reminded me of your perfume."

"You seem to know a lot about flowers."

He shrugged. "Some family friends own a flower shop so I learned a bit here and there." He did not mention Ino.

She took a cloth from the top of the basket and spread it out. "Come on lets have our lunch."

He sat down next to her and helped put out the plates of food. "You know this really is amazing, this is the first green I've laid eyes on since arriving here."

"Well I've always loved flowers and I enjoy being surrounded by beauty."

He looked directly at her. "Yes it is very beautiful here." At his words she turned a slight shade of crimson. There was a momentary silence. "Temari?"

"Yes?"

"Why do you like me?"

She gave him a confused look. "What do you mean?"

He leaned back into the soft grass and turned his eyes upward towards the green and blue. "I mean why do you like a lazy Chunin from another country when you have your pick of any guy you want?"

She stared at him. "You ask some really stupid questions you know that?"

He looked at her very seriously. "Temari you are the most beautiful and amazing girl I have ever met and every time I'm with you I can't believe how lucky I am." He grinned. "Even when you are hitting me with that damn fan of yours. I just think you are absolutely wonderful and I ask myself what I ever did to deserve to be with someone like you. I wonder what I could ever give you."

She got up and sat down in the grass right next to him. "You know for a genius you can be pretty damn stupid sometimes. You want to know what you can give me?" With a finger she poked his forehead. "This. You can give me yourself. Give me your time, your attention, your affection, and be there when I need you and I will never ask for anything else in this life."

"Temari I..."

She put her hands on his cheeks and leaned close to whisper to him. "Don't worry about other guys or what anyone else thinks. Don't worry about being from another village. Don't worry about any of that and don't you dare ever wonder if you are good enough for me. Don't ask me what is in my heart when I look at you, I don't have the words to tell you." She shut her eyes. "Do we have to talk about this? Couldn't you just be kissing me now?"

He put his arms around her and pulled her down into the lush grass as he kissed her soft lips. She could feel his love for her in his kisses and in the way his arms held her tight. She longed with all her soul for time to stop and to have this moment for always.

A prince and a fair maiden

They were in the garden, the remains of another delicious meal were packed into the basket and they were relaxing beneath the palm leaves. Temari had her eyes closed and her head lying in his lap. There were no plans for the rest of the day. They would find something to do, or not but they knew they would spend the rest of the day together. That was enough.

Temari opened a single eye and looked up at him. "Hey lazy, tell me a story."

He looked down at her curiously. "I don't know any."

She poked him in the ribs. "Baka, everyone knows some stories. Now tell me one, I want you to entertain me."

He smirked at her. "Fine I'll tell you one."

She closed her eye and grinned smugly. "I want it to be romantic, you know with a prince and a fair maiden, that kind of story."

"A prince and a fair maiden huh?" He grinned. "You know I think I do have a story for you. You see the story begins..."

"Once upon a time," she interrupted. "All these kinds of stories begin with, 'once upon a time.'"

He rolled his eyes even though she couldn't see it. "Troublesome woman, fine, once upon a time in a land far from here called Konoha there lived a handsome prince by the name of Nara Shikaku..."

18 years ago, before the Kyuubi's attack, before the choosing of the Yondaime, in the second year of a bitter war between Iwagakure and Konohagakure.

"You are such a liar!" Choza called him out.

"Geez what a filthy imagination! You should write some of those dirty books. You know the ones Jiraiya is always reading." Inoichi added.

"Hey! Why are you guys being so troublesome? I swear it's true!"

"Liar!" They both shouted at him.

"But it's true! Her sister really did walk in on us and she said..."

"What a powerful sword!" Choza mimicked a girl's shriek. The three of them burst into laughter.

Shikaku spotted something and suddenly straightened up in his chair. "Uh oh, I think I've just acquired a new target!"

His two friends both looked in the direction he was staring. "Oh no!" Choza groaned.

"Her *again* ? Shikaku don't you suffer enough from the Rock nins?" Inoichi put in.

He stood up a bit shakily. "Hey she is the hottest girl in here and no woman can resist the Nara charm forever." He left the table and headed for the bar. "Wish me luck! I am going to engage the enemy!"

Both his friends cheered him on until he was out of hearing. "50 ryu says she punches him again." Choza said.

Inoichi thought for a moment, but shook his head. "No bet."

The music was loud and different colored lights were flashing on and off in time with it. The dance floor was packed as was the bar. The Red Lantern was the most popular club in Konoha and the best place to meet beautiful and available young women. Tonight was no exception. Shikakau had locked on to one very lucky lady.

"So what is it like to be the most beautiful woman in all of Konoha?"
He slid up beside his intended target.

The woman gave him an exasperated look and shook her head. "I wouldn't know. Why don't you try asking me what it's like to be the most hounded? I told you last time and the time before that and the time before that I'm not interested."

He looked hurt. "You know all I want is to buy you one drink."

"I've got my own money thanks."

"Well could you at least tell me your name this time?"

"No that would just encourage you."

"Well how about your phone number then?" He gave her a winning smile.

The look she sent him could have frozen fire. "I won't even tell you my name. *Why* would I give you my number?"

"You know I'm just trying to be friendly. Most women would appreciate the attention."

"Go bother one of them then."

He gave her a considering look. "Say, you're not a lesbian are you? If you are there's a club just..."

The next thing he knew he was waking up on the floor with his two teammates kneeling over him.

"What happened?" His jaw hurt like hell.

"The Queen Bitch hit you again. Now come on lets get you to the hospital so you can get healed up... again." Inoichi said.

As his friends helped him up he yelped in pain. "My ribs! What the hell? It feels like they're broken."

"Wouldn't surprise me. After she punched you she spent about five minutes kicking you." Choza said.

He shot his two friends a betrayed look. "And you two just watched? Some friends you are."

"We didn't sign up for a suicide mission." Inoichi said flatly.

"Come on lets get you to the hospital." Choza carefully put his friend on his back. "What did you say to her anyway?"

Shikaku grinned. "I asked her if she was a lesbian."

"Yes that would do it." Choza nodded.

"From her reaction I'm guessing she's not." Inoichi said.

"So are you finally ready to give up on the Queen Bitch?" Choza asked.

Even though it hurt Shikaku laughed. "Hell no!"

Inoichi shook his head. "You really do have a death wish don't you?"

"Why are we coming here? I don't even like sea food. Man what a drag." Shikaku whined.

"It's my turn to pick where we eat and I do." Inoichi replied.

"The food is supposed to be pretty good." Choza tried to play peacemaker. "They serve sake and beer."

"Well then it can't be too bad." Shikaku said.

They entered the new restaurant's ornate doors and were greeted by a short fellow with salt and pepper hair wearing a truly ugly yellow uniform. "Welcome gentleman! The Hotono Fish Palace is honored to serve three of its heroic shinobi warriors! Would you gentlemen prefer a booth or table?"

"We always get a booth in the back." Inoichi informed him.

The man nodded happily and led the way. Taking a look around it seemed a nice enough place. They had only been open a couple of months and were still trying to establish themselves. It looked to only be about half full despite it being near dinner time. They were seated at a booth and the man informed them their waitress would be there shortly.

The three of them were looking at menus and trying to decide whether to start off with a round of sake or beer first.

Their waitress came over; she had on the same distinctive yellow uniform. "Can I start you off with some appetizers gentlemen?"

Shikaku looked up from the menu. "No but we'll get..." He took one look at the pretty waitress and his jaw dropped. "You!"

When she his face she gave him a look of pure fury. "You! What are you doing here did you follow me you stalker?!"

"Hey! Me and my friends just came here to eat!"

"Well listen you jerk don't think..."

" Yoshino! "

The girl jumped about two feet into the air. When she landed she turned around to face the same man who had seated them. "What are you doing yelling at customers?"

"Father I just..."

He looked up at her and stuck a finger half an inch from her nose and began shaking it. "Don't think just because you are 19 you are too old to go over my knee daughter."

Shikaku enjoyed the sight of seeing her seem to shrink before his very eyes. She nodded meekly. "Yes father."

The man then turned to the three of them and put on a happy smile. "Please forgive my daughter she has always been disrespectful and rude." He turned back to her. "Do not yell at the customers again Yoshino. What do I always say?"

"Happy customers are life, unhappy customers are death." She repeated the mantra.

"Best remember that." The man gave the three of them a bow and left to greet some new arrivals.

When she turned back towards them the smile on Shikaku's face gave her a very bad feeling. She tried sending them a happy smile. "I apologize for my rude behavior."

Shikaku lifted an eyebrow. "Do you mean here or at the club?"

He could see the smile crack, but the woman held onto it somehow. "I mean here as I am *serving* you." She seemed to struggle a bit with the word. "Are you ready to order?"

Choza was about to say something but Shikaku gave him no chance. "Actually I am not sure would you mind terribly reading out the *entire* menu to us?"

"You're joking."

"Well if it's too much trouble I could always ask your dad if we could get a different waitress. One who is less rude and disrespectful to the customers."

She sent him a look of pure hatred, but her tone was mild. "I would be *happy* to read the menu out to you."

Choza sent Inoichi a discontented glance. "You picked this place."

"How was I supposed to know the Queen Bitch worked here?"

"What did you call me?" Inoichi shrank back from the woman as he felt a wave of killer intent roll off her.

"He called you, 'Queen Bitch.'" Shikaku replied helpfully stressing the two syllables. "But we had to call you something since we didn't know your name, *Yoshino*. Now I would appreciate it if you would get back to reading out the menu for us."

At the end of the evening Shikaku left a generous tip on the table as he got up to follow his friends. "Well *Yoshino* that was a wonderful meal. I'll be seeing you tomorrow."

She sent him a smirk. "I only get one night off a week and it's not tomorrow, I'll be working not going to the club."

He smiled. "I know."

"Well that was another great meal; please send my compliments to the chief." He dumped more than enough ryu notes on the table and stood up to leave.

She got in his way and whispered to him. "All right you've been here four nights in a row I want you to leave me alone."

He gave her a smug look. "Can I help it if the food and service are so wonderful here?"

"You don't like the food that much." She stated flatly.

"Must be the service then."

"What is it going to take for you to stop coming here?"

"Have one drink with me."

She looked like she had swallowed and overripe lemon, but after a moment she finally nodded. "I get off at ten; I'll meet you at Noslen's bar down the street."

She met him at the bar. They each got a beer. When she got hers she put it to her lips and chugged it down in about ten seconds.

She slammed the bottle back down on the bar and stood up. "All right I had a drink with you, good bye."

"Bye, I'll see you tomorrow I'm thinking of trying the snapper."

She sat back down again. "Look why won't you just leave me alone, you are never getting what you want!"

"What do you mean?" He sipped his own beer.

"No matter how much you annoy me or piss me off at work I am *never* going to sleep with you."

He looked just shocked. "Oh *Yoshino* ! How could you think so poorly of me?"

She looked to the bartender and asked for another beer. "Well *Shikaku* it's probably because you've been trying to get me into bed since we met."

"A gentleman would never proposition a lady. All I've been trying to do this whole time is get you to know me."

"That's all, huh?" She answered sarcastically.

He nodded. "Now if after you get to know me you should *want* to sleep with me..."

"You know if I were to murder you right now no court would convict me."

He shrugged. "Well if it helps any my squad is going back to the front next week. We're pulling another 60 day rotation. Maybe if you get lucky some Rock nin will bury me and you'll be saved."

She gave him a sharp look. "Don't joke about that, too many people have already died in this war for that to be funny. I don't want you to die I just want you to leave me alone."

He nodded to her beer. "Drink that and I'm sure you'll start to feel better."

"The only thing that would help would be forgetting you completely."

"Well enough alcohol can do even that."

She shook her head. "I have a high tolerance for alcohol. It's a high tolerance for annoying men I lack."

He shrugged. "I'm sure it's pretty high for a woman." He took a pull at his beer.

She sent him a look. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"What? I was complimenting you. I'm sure that for a woman you can put it away."

"Listen jerk I am the hardest drinker in my family."

"Doesn't say too much about your family then does it?"

Her eyes turned to slits. "I bet I could drink you under the table." He just laughed. "You afraid?"

He stopped laughing and looked at her. "You're serious."

"Damn right."

He thought about it for a bit. "All right, but if I win you have to go out on a date with me on your next day off."

"Fine, and if I win you promise never to set foot in the restaurant ever again."

"Don't you want me to promise to stay out of the Red Lantern too?"

"No, I like putting you in your place when you're being an ass."

He shook his head. "Woman there is no way you can out drink me. In fact not only will I stay away from the restaurant, if you out drink me you can have this." From beneath his shirt he pulled out a pendant.

She looked closely at it. She'd never seen anything quite like it. On the end of a slim chain was a ball of polished reddish brown onyx wrapped by three bands of silver. On the central band she could see an engraved name, *Shikaku*.

"Are you sure you want to bet that? I don't own any expensive pieces of jewelry and that looks nice."

"It has a sale value of about 2,000 ryu."

She believed him. "You sure you want to risk it?"

"It's not a risk." He said blandly.

She shrugged her shoulders and turned to the bartender. "Can I get a couple bottles of 100 proof vodka and two shot glasses please?"

"Vodka?" He said a bit surprised.

"Beer would take too long and I have work tomorrow."

He woke up with his head splitting open. His tongue had become sand paper and he had the yummy after taste of vomit. Another

great night out with the boys. As he slowly, very slowly, lifted his head he could see he was still in his clothes and sprawled out on his couch. He got to his feet and wandered over to the bathroom. He didn't remember much, but that wasn't exactly unusual. He got the half empty aspirin bottle out of the cabinet and dumped nine or ten into his mouth. He cupped his hands beneath the faucet and gulped down enough water to get them swallowed. Now a hot shower and then some tea. As he got undresses he noticed something was missing. Damn it! Where the hell had he put it? He stumbled back out to the sofa and began checking beneath it then between the cushions and all around it.

"Troublesome," he muttered to himself. He was sure it was just lost somewhere in the house but he didn't like not knowing where it was. He put his hands together and performed three seals. " **Shadow Lost Lamb Technique: Shikaku.** " Immediately his shadow stretched out about ten feet going out underneath his front door. What the hell? "Did I lose it in the club?" He *never* lost it, not even during battle. What had happened last night where had the three of them gone? He tried to remember. Oh wait! He hadn't been with the boys. That's right he had finally gotten her to have that drink with him. Then she had suggested that ridiculous challenge. And he had accepted saying if she won not only would he stay out of the restaurant but he would give her...

He suddenly stiffened. No! That was not possible! Nara Shikano's boy losing to a *girl* in a drinking contest? For the first time in his life he was glad his dad was not alive to see this. "Geez if the guys find out they'll never let me live it down." There was also the little matter of getting it back. He shook his head still not believing it. Well he knew what he had to do. The living room clock said it was almost eleven. He'd found out she worked a shift from 1:30 to 10:00 and she'd said she was working today. He would have time to get what he needed and see her. He stumbled back to the bathroom. It was shaping up to be a lousy day.

Somehow she was not surprised to see him standing outside her work. He definitely looked the worse for wear. Laughing to herself she added a spring to her step and approached him. "Well hello Shikaku!" She deliberately said in a loud voice. By the way he cringed he was obviously still hung over. Served the jerk right. "You're not going back on your word are you? You kept telling me what a gentleman you are and how a gentleman would never break his word, especially to a lady."

He shook his head and gave her a baleful look. "Woman I said I wouldn't step foot in the restaurant and as you can see I am outside of it."

"Good to know you're such an upstanding fellow. Now if you'll excuse me I have to get to work."

He stepped between her and the door. "Look woman I just came here to get my heart back I know you have it."

She stared at him, and burst out laughing. "That's pitiful, that has got to be your worst line yet! What are you going to do start telling me about how I've stolen your heart?"

He glared at her. "No, you didn't steal it you just won it somehow and I want it back." She looked completely confused. He let out an exasperated breath. "The pendant from last night, it's special and I want to get it back."

She smiled suddenly understanding. "Oh, you mean this." She pulled it out from underneath her dress. "Why do you call it a heart when it's a sphere?"

He shut his eyes and ground out an explanation. "It's not just a piece of jewelry. It's a very special and precious item that's unique to my clan; we call it a Nara's Heart. Each one is made and commissioned for a specific person and has special locator jutsus placed on it. Any member of the Nara clan can locate it with a simple jutsu so the wearer will never be lost. What you're holding there is *my* heart

which was given to me by my father just after I was born. It's very precious to me and I've come to get it back."

She looked impressed. "Well if it's so precious you shouldn't have bet it." She quickly hid it beneath her dress again. "I don't have any really nice things and I happen to think it's beautiful. I'm keeping it. I won it fairly and you can't just take it back."

"I know woman, that's why I brought this with me." He held out a manila envelope to her.

"What's that?"

"I stopped by the bank before I came here, it's 5,000 ryu that's more than double what you could get for it."

She didn't reach for it and simply shook her head. "No, I'd rather just keep it."

He stared at her. "What? Why? Take the money and you can buy all the shiny baubles you want. It's just a trinket to you but to me it's very precious." He was starting to get angry.

She glared at him starting to feel her own temper rise. "It's precious to me too you ass. It happens to be the first really nice piece I've ever gotten and I *earned* it on my own without anyone's help. I happen to really like it and I'm keeping it."

"Look I'll make it 10,000."

"Please excuse me I'm going to be late for work."

As she tried to get past him he had to jump about to stay between her and the door. The customers who were walking in and out of the restaurant were staring at the odd couple. "Look I am *not* leaving here without my heart! Just name your price. I'll stay away from you and never speak to you again, hell I'll run in the other direction if I see you, just tell me what you want."

She stopped trying to get past him. "What I want is for you to let me get to work! Look if you've got so much damn money why don't you just have a new one made?"

"It wouldn't be the same. My *father* gave this to me and he's been dead four years now."

That caught her off guard. "Really?" He nodded. Damn it. If it really was a reminder to him of his father then it wouldn't be right to keep it. It was a shame, she really did like it, and she had wanted to teach this ass a lesson for underestimating her. But as much of a jerk as he had been he really hadn't done anything *that* bad to her. She would just have to be satisfied with costing him a wad of cash and wounding his stupid male pride. It was just too bad she couldn't do a bit more to him.

As fate would have it her father stuck his head out the door at that moment. "Yoshino! Stop flirting with your boyfriend and get in here!"

"He is not..."

"Ramaki quit so I need you to take over for him."

"What? Oh come on dad I hate doing that job and I won't make any tips!"

Her father looked anything but sympathetic. "You know the rules and you're the youngest." He went back inside.

"Damn it!" She looked at Shikaku and was about to start railing at him when she suddenly had a brilliant idea.

Shikaku took a look at her face and abruptly felt a cold dread like when he was point on a recon mission. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You would do anything to get this back right?"

"Damn near." He answered warily. She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the restaurant. "Hey!"

Her father looked at the two of them as they came in. Before he could ask she spoke up.

"Father I have great news! Shikaku here has agreed to be our new fish boy."

"What?! Woman what the hell are you talking about?"

She turned to him and crossed her arms looking self-righteous. "Well do you want this back or not? I won't sell it to you and if you try and take it from me I'll scream bloody murder. But if you'll agree to work here as fish boy for six months I'll give it back to you."

He stared at her his mouth open. "Woman are you insane? Do you see this?" He tapped the green vest he had on over his fishnet shirt. "I am a Chunin of Konoha and beyond that I am head of the Nara clan and you expect me to be a *fish boy*?"

"Do want your, 'heart,' back or not?"

"Just take the damn money."

"What money?" Her father asked but was ignored.

"I don't want it; I prefer to earn what I get. Now like I said if you'll agree to work here for six months I'll give it back to you."

"I am an active duty combat shinobi and my platoon is going back to the front in two days. Do you expect me to tell the Hokage I can't go because I have to work in a restaurant?"

"I've talked to shinobi before; you're 60 days on and 60 days off right?" He nodded. "Fine, when you're in Konoha you work here that's all. You can work the same shift I do, six days a week from 1:30 to 10:00. When you've worked the equivalent of six months I'll give you your heart back."

"His heart?" Her father questioned.

"That'll take a year."

She smiled. "Only if you start immediately." She saw her father about to say something. "And you work for free of course." Her father lit up.

"Of course," he said dully. This could not be real it had to be some sort of nightmare. "Please tell me you're joking with me and you'll let me buy it back from you."

She headed towards the back of the restaurant. "Come on I'll get you an apron and a hair net. Are you good with knives?"

"Deadly."

She smiled at him. "Good."

In short order he found himself seated at a small table in the back of the kitchen surrounded by five huge baskets stuffed with dead fish and ice. He had on a hair net and a dirty semi-white apron. His Chunin vest was hanging in an adjacent room in a rusty locker. Shikaku took out one of the fish and stared at it.

"You know I could have avoided all this." He said to the fish. "I could have just gone for the blonde who was smiling at me. But no, I have to like brunettes." The fish was wise enough to not say anything."

"Hey fish boy stop talking to your friend and get to work. Start gutting and chopping off heads." Yoshino smirked.

He looked from the fish to the cause of this situation. "I am very eager to begin decapitating and gutting. But what do you want me to do with the damn fish?" She laughed at him and walked out of the kitchen. He looked back to the fish still in his hand. "From now on I swear blondes and red heads only!" He looked at the rather dull kitchen knife and set it aside. From a belt pouch he removed one of his razor sharp kunai. "Sorry about this, I really would rather be

doing this to someone else." He brought the knife down and began his work.

At the end of the night the two of them exited the restaurant together with a few other employees.

"How did you like your first day on the job?" She asked him.

He sent her a surly look. "I never thought I'd say this but I actually think I'm looking forward to getting back to the war."

She shrugged. "Just 179 more days to go."

"Why are you doing this? Why won't you just accept my money?"

She looked at him. "Tell me something. Am I making your life miserable for no other reason than that I can?"

"Yes."

"That's why." With that she turned around and headed home. "See you tomorrow fish boy."

"Where have you been lately?" Choza asked.

"I've been busy." Shikaku answered looking around the club nervously.

"Busy with some new girl I'll bet." Inoichi complained. "Is she so amazing you forget about your friends? We've barely seen you for the last week."

"Don't be so troublesome, we're going to be together for the next 2 months."

"Yes because we are combat squad ten. But when we are home we get together because we are *friends*. You shouldn't let any woman

come between you and your friends." Inoichi pointed out.

"Guys I swear it's not like that." Shikaku continued to stare about nervously.

"What is wrong with you?" Choza asked. "You look like you are waiting to be ambushed."

"I'm just looking out for someone."

"Who?" Choza inquired.

"I'll bet he's worried about his new lady." Inoichi said.

"Guys why don't we go somewhere else?" Shikaku pleaded.

"We always come here the night before we leave its tradition." Choza said.

"Don't go screwing with tradition." Inoichi said.

That was when he saw her. "Ah damn it!" He tried to duck and hide behind Choza.

"What are you doing?" Choza asked.

"I don't want her to see me." Shikaku said.

"Who are you talking about?" Choza said.

Inoichi however had seen where he was looking. "You're dating the Queen Bitch! Shikaku you sly bastard you finally wore her down!"

"No, it's not like that. Come on guys lets sneak out of here before she notices me."

"I think it's too late for that, she's coming over." Inoichi said.

She approached their table with a huge smile and a low cut black dress. "Well hello fish boy." Without asking she sat down at their table.

"Shikaku is she wearing your pendant?" Choza asked.

"Fish boy?" Inoichi looked at his friend.

"Oh did he not tell you about losing this to me after I beat him in a drinking contest?" She asked playfully. "Or about the fact he is working in my family's restaurant as our fish boy so he can get it back? Here I brought some pictures." She helpfully handed them some photos.

As his two friends studied them he sent the woman a murderous look.

"Do you miss him?" Suska asked her little sister as they put on their uniforms in the small locker room.

"Are you crazy?" Yoshino stared at her. "He's a jerk, I hate him."

She sent her a knowing look. "So is that why you made sure you'd see him for a whole year?"

"I wanted to teach him a lesson about underestimating women."

"You sure? I've noticed you seem to spend an *awful* lot of time in the kitchen when he's here."

"I hate him! That's why I went over to where he and his friends were last night and spent an hour telling them about how I outsmarted him." Her sister just gave her an amused look. "What?"

"You went to the trouble of spending an hour with him outside of work? Yeah it really sounds like you can't stand the guy."

"It's not like we were on a date! In fact he told me he was going to, 'get even,' with me when he gets back."

"Sure, listen Yoshino do me one favor."

"What?" She asked suspiciously.

"Make me Maid of Honor at your wedding."

"Baka!"

He was smiling at her as he stepped out of the men's dressing room.
"Welcome back fish boy."

"Thanks so good to be back. By the way don't think I've forgotten I owe you for embarrassing me in front of my friends."

"What are you going to do?" She asked smugly.

He smiled more. "Let's just say it's not wise to piss off a shinobi, especially not one with my level of stealth skills."

"I'm quaking in terror." She said as she ducked into the women's dressing room and he headed towards the kitchen.

An hour into her shift she was sure something was wrong. People kept laughing and giggling around her. But when she asked no one would tell her why. Even more disturbing than the general laughter and looks there was a middle aged blonde woman who seemed to be *flirting* with her.

" **Yoshino!** " Her father yelled at her.

"What?"

"What is on the back of your uniform?"

She tried looking and sure enough there seemed to be writing in black letters. What the hell? It had been perfectly clean when she put it on. She couldn't make out what it said and so headed to the ladies restroom. When she got there she was able to look at her back in the mirror. There the words, *I kiss girls*, could be clearly seen.

Shikaku was not surprised when he felt the killer intent as she stormed into the kitchen. He looked into her red face and asked mildly. "Something wrong Yoshino?"

"You bastard! You humiliate me in front of my whole family?"

"Well if you would just have the courage to come out and admit the truth you wouldn't need my help."

" I am not a lesbian! "

He shook his head. "More denial it's not healthy for you. I talked to your sister why haven't you ever dated anyone for more than two weeks?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but every guy I meet is just like you interested in just one thing."

"So you decided to switch teams?"

Her fists clenched and she shook, wanting to reach out and choke the life out of him. "I am *not* a lesbian."

"Your sister thinks you might be."

"She does not!"

Suska stuck her head into the kitchen. "Actually I do but it's all right sis, I love you no matter what lifestyle you choose." She ducked back out of the kitchen.

Yoshino stared at the man. "I am going to make you regret this."

"To quote a troublesome woman, 'I am quaking in terror.'"

She stormed out of the kitchen to change her uniform.

"You sure you're not a lesbian?"

"Ask me again after I've had to deal with you a couple more months!"

The following day he was on his half hour lunch break and having his usual roast beef sandwich. He still didn't like fish all that much so he had gotten into the habit of packing his own lunch. He had eaten about half of it when he suspected something might be wrong. He felt a sour ache in his belly and the impulse to start gagging. Before he could even get up he was vomiting on the floor. He was on his hands and knees trying to stop retching. Five minutes later, when his stomach was mercifully empty he noticed a presence standing a few feet away. He saw her put down a small bottle of ipecac.

"You know you're going to have to clean that up."

"You..."

"The mop and bucket are over there." She pointed helpfully.

The day after that Suska was still shocked. "I can't believe you did that."

"I think he finally knows better than to mess with me now." They were at their lockers getting ready for a new day.

"Aren't you worried he's going to do something to get back at you?"

"He wouldn't dare." She opened her locker and was promptly buried under an avalanche of about 50 fish heads. Yoshino just stood there, too shocked to even start yelling. Her uniform and her *new dress* were drenched in fish juice.

Suska gaped. "Yeah, he wouldn't dare all right."

She stormed into the kitchen and grabbed a butcher's knife. "**Shikaku!**"

"Something wrong *Yoshino*?" That was all he got out before she began chasing him around the kitchen with her knife.

That evening she waited for him outside the restaurant.

"I am sorry I stabbed you."

He shrugged. "It's just a flesh wound I've had worse."

"I smelled of raw fish all day."

"I smell that way every day."

"Yeah, but you're not trying to get tips. You do know I am going to have to get back at you now?"

"Of course, and then I'll have to retaliate."

"Of course," she began to leave.

"Do you always walk home alone?"

"Usually."

"May I walk you home?"

"No." She began to walk away. She had gotten half a dozen steps before he was at her side. She came to an immediate halt. "I told you I don't want you to walk me home."

"A gentleman does not allow a lady to go home alone."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know, my ribs *still* ache some times."

She couldn't help it, she grinned a little. When he wasn't acting like an ass he *could* be kind of funny. She shrugged her shoulders and started walking again. "Fine I don't really care." He fell into step beside her and they walked together in silence.

They walked for about twenty minutes before coming to an abrupt stop outside a slightly run down brick apartment building.

"This is me." She said and turned to face him, ready to shoot down yet another lame come on.

He nodded. "Good night Yoshino." He simply turned around and headed back the way they'd come.

"That's it?" She said in surprise, bringing him up short. "You're not going to try and convince me to invite you up?"

"No I'm not. I'm very tired and I've had enough grief and aggravation for one night." With that he leaped up onto the side of the building and then onto the roof. He jumped across roof tops and was quickly gone from sight.

Yoshino stood out in the warm summer night feeling an odd mix of emotions. She was mostly surprised, partly relieved, and a very small part of her was... disappointed. She shook her head and hurried into her building, she needed a long hot shower to get rid of the smell of fish.

"Do you suppose he's all right?" Yoshino asked.

Suska looked at her younger sister as they wiped the tables down and put the chairs up. She didn't need to ask which *he* she was talking about. "I honestly don't know. I hope so."

"The news from the front is very bad, so much fighting so much killing; I hope he's all right." Suska sent her a knowing smile. "Don't start with me, he's a jerk but I don't want him or anyone else to be killed. There's nothing wrong with that." She said defensively.

"I didn't say there was. You know if you want we can go over to the temple and make an offering for his safe return."

"Do you actually think that helps?"

"Well it certainly can't hurt and it's *something* ."

Yoshino thought about it. "All right lets do that."

He had returned to the restaurant four days later than expected. She had begun going out of her mind with worry. She had actually checked the casualty lists in the papers searching for his name. When he walked into the restaurant he was in a gruff mood. There were two bandages across his face.

"Shikaku are you all right?" When she saw him she ran up to him and wrapped her arms around him giving him a hug.

He looked at her in surprise, as did Suska and her father. "I am fine Yoshino." He looked down at her face and was taken back to see her eyes were wet.

She nodded and let go of him, quickly rubbing her eyes. "What happened? Your face?" She reached out and gently touched his cheek.

His face suddenly felt hot under her touch. He gave her a reassuring grin. "Oh these are nothing; a Rock nin was nice enough to give me some beauty marks that's all."

"But you're all right?" He nodded. "Your friends too?"

He suddenly looked hurt. "Choza and Inoichi are both fine, though things were kind of hairy for awhile. But not all my friends were so lucky. Now I need to get to the kitchen."

"Shikaku if you'd like you could take a few days..."

He gave her a grin. "Woman a man always does what he has to. Besides I would like to be busy." She just nodded and he headed to the back.

He was at his usual work station chopping and cutting. She could sense he was not in a good mood. His usual little smart ass grin was missing and he seemed very withdrawn. Normally he would make small talk with the staff and with Suska, but today he was keeping to himself. She wasn't sure what or even if she should say something to him but there seemed no way she could stay away from him.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." He said politely as he kept cutting fish without missing a beat.

"Did you kill anyone?"

He stopped. He looked up at her with one of his rare empty faces. "Why do you ask that?"

She wasn't sure. "I don't know I just wondered. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

He stared at her with that blank face, but she could see the conflict in his eyes. "Two," he said quietly and began cutting again. "I killed two enemies."

"How do you feel about that?"

He stopped working again. He looked at her but this time his expression was one of puzzlement "Feel? I don't feel anything about it."

"You killed two people and you don't feel anything?"

"That's right Yoshino. I feel a great deal when I go to the front. I feel pride in my shinobi skills and in the fact I am protecting my village. I feel fear and excitement every time I am on patrol and am about to go into a fight. I feel relief when it's over and my teammates and I are alive. I feel grief when I know one of my comrades is gone. I feel satisfaction when the mission is completed or the fight won. And I feel joy every single time I see the gates as my team and I come home. But when I'm killing, when I am ending the life of an enemy so he doesn't end mine or my friend's I feel nothing. I don't let myself feel anything because if I did I would start to think about it. And if I start to think about it, it will begin to eat me up. And if that happens I will hesitate to do what I must and if I hesitate I put not only my life but the lives of my friends in danger. And I would never do that, so I have taught myself to feel nothing." He stopped and the entire kitchen was silent. Every single person had stopped to listen to him. He picked up the kunai and began cutting fish.

"I'm sorry." Yoshino said quietly.

"Don't be sorry. Does this change how you see me?" She could only nod. "Makes you see me as a heartless killer huh?"

"No, just the opposite."

He wasn't sure what she meant by that but before he could ask she had headed out to the floor.

The next day she came into the kitchen already in uniform holding a bento box.

"What's this?" He asked suspiciously as she set it in front of him.

"Please consider it a peace offering. I know we can't make peace with Rock but I'd like to stop the fighting between us."

He looked at her. "Are you serious?"

She nodded. "I made you some beef stir fry with vegetables and rice."

"Thank you." He opened the bento and looked at the contents warily. "You didn't poison it did you?"

"No, I swear. At this point I really don't care who started what."

He nodded. "All right Yoshino if you'll stop I will too. Speaking of which could I have your pen?"

She was surprised by his request. She was even more surprised when he threw her pen into the trash. "Why are you..." From the trash can she heard a soft, 'boomf.'

"Very tiny explosive note. Not strong enough to break the skin but enough to send ink flying everywhere."

She looked at him admiringly. "You know you're very good at this."

"Shinobi," he said simply. "You know for someone who can't use chakra you're very good as well."

"Two older brothers," she replied. They both shared a laugh.

She was sitting at the bar when three guys came up to her. As always happened they began hitting on her. As always happened she let them know their attentions were not welcome.

"Come on baby have a drink with us." Idiot number one said.

"Thank you but I already have a drink."

"Well let us buy you another." Idiot number two said.

"No thank you I am not interested."

"Aw come on baby don't be like that." Idiot number one put his hand on her shoulder, only to have it slapped away.

"Don't touch me you drunk ass!"

"What's the problem?" Idiot number one asked.

"Maybe she's scared to be touched by a real man." Idiot number three put in.

Idiot number one leaned closer to her. "Aw is that the problem baby? You shy? Want a real man to show you some attention?"

He was about five seconds away from getting his nose broken when he suddenly stiffened. Moving faster than she'd have thought possible he flattened one of his friends with a punch and the other with a perfect kick to the head.

"What the hell I'm possessed!" The man shouted in terror, just before slamming his head into the bar and knocking himself out. Yoshino was on her feet looking down at three unconscious drunks.

"Normally I don't ever have to use shadow manipulation technique when I'm in Konoha. But it does come in handy some times." Shikaku came over to her.

She crossed her arms. "I would have dealt with them."

"I know I just didn't like seeing you being treated so disrespectfully."

She gawked at him. "You're joking. You don't like it when someone else does the exact thing you do?"

He looked at her in surprise. "I have never behaved that way."

She shook her head. "You never put your hands on me. I'll give you that. But the rest of it?"

He stared. "Was I really like *that* ?" She nodded. "I always thought I was being charming."

"You weren't." She said flatly. "You bothered me and no matter how many times I asked you to stop you wouldn't."

He looked down at the three men, and then back at her. He straightened up and then bowed to her. "Yoshino if my previous behavior was anything like that then I apologize to you. I sincerely regret if I seemed to be disrespecting you. Please believe that was never my intent."

She was genuinely surprised. In all her experience this was the very first time a man had offered her a real apology for the way he'd behaved. "Shikaku?"

"Yes?"

She gave him a little smile. "Buy a girl a drink?"

"Nice apartment." He said politely.

She looked around her place. "I know it's not much, but it's mine." She spoke with pride.

It had turned into a very surprising night. When he had sat down next to her at the bar they had talked and it had been pleasant. That happened more and more at work. Since calling a halt to their little war their conversations had actually grown friendly. While at the bar she had hinted she wouldn't mind being asked to dance. He however had told her flat out that he did not dance. So instead they had spent a couple hours sitting at the bar sipping on drinks and talking over loud music. When she had decided it was time to go he had walked her home. When they had gotten to her building she had surprised him again by asking if he would like to come up for tea.

And so, without even trying, he had found himself sitting at a small plastic table sipping a cup of tea. The apartment was tiny; it had a small bathroom, a kitchen connected to a living room, and a bedroom he had not been allowed to glimpse. It was sparsely filled and the furniture had clearly seen better days. But everything was in order and the place was immaculate. It was the opposite of his home which was large, spacious, filled with furniture and other items, and an absolute wreck. One look inside was enough to tell anyone that it was the home to a bachelor.

"I don't suppose you really understand. Being the head of a clan and all, but everything here was earned by me."

"No, I can understand pride." He sipped his tea. "But you know you still *could* have taken my money. You would have earned that too since you had my heart." He saw her grinning. "What?"

She chuckled. "I just like hearing you put it that way, when you say I have your heart."

"Well you do, and the first time I told you that you laughed at me."

"I thought it was just another one of your stupid pick up lines."

He looked at her seriously. "Why didn't you take my money? Was it really just so you could teach me a lesson?"

"Well that was part of it."

"What was the rest of it then?"

She took a hold of the silver onyx pendant and looked at it. "The truth is I just wanted it more than I wanted the money. I've never had any beautiful things and I don't own any expensive jewelry. This is the first really nice thing I have ever owned and I just wanted to keep it."

He sipped his tea. "Well if I had known that I suppose I could have had a new one commissioned and offered you that. Well, actually no I suppose I couldn't."

She gave him a curious look. "Why not? Wouldn't that have been cheaper?"

"Yes, but the problem wouldn't have been the cost. It would have been me giving you my heart."

She shook her head. "You are going to have to explain that one."

"Well you see there are a great many family traditions that I honor out of respect for my clan. One of them involves giving a heart to a woman. You see they can be given to children or male friends at leisure. But if I give it to a woman there is a special meaning. It means I give her my heart for always and that she is the only woman I will ever love or pursue." Yoshino stared at him. "Relax woman, I didn't give that to you I lost it on a bet. Besides what name is on it?"

"Yours."

He nodded. "When I give my heart to a woman I will have it commissioned and it will have her name on it."

"What happens if she doesn't want it?"

He laughed. "Then I'll thank her for letting me find someone who will. If she doesn't accept it then I am not bound."

She looked at him oddly. "It sounds like a special way to propose."

"Well not really. It's more a declaration of love and intention. My dad gave my mom one of course, but she still got an engagement and wedding ring later. He proposed a couple years after he asked her to accept his heart."

She looked more closely at the pendant. "Have you ever thought of giving one to someone?"

He shook his head. "I haven't found her yet and I am not sure I ever will."

She lifted an eyebrow. "Don't you believe in love?"

"In love yes, I love my friends, I love my village, but finding one woman I can love for the rest of my life? Who knows? Besides I don't plan to marry until I am at least 40, if I live that long."

"Forty?"

"I want to have gotten all adventuring and playing out of my system before I settle down and start having kids."

She laughed at him. "You make marriage sound like a prison sentence."

"Well I am not going to worry about it now. The way things are I don't know about reaching twenty two never mind forty."

"Baka! Don't say things like that." He shrugged. "What kind of woman do you want any way?"

He smiled. "I've recently decided she will have to be blonde or red head and she needs to be a soft compliant wife who will be happy to stay home and raise four or five children while I take care of the important decisions."

"Oh a trophy wife, how predictable. Don't you think a woman like that would bore you? Wouldn't you rather have a strong intelligent wife who will help you with making decisions and other burdens?"

"You mean someone like you?"

She laughed. "As if I'd put up with you! Besides, when and *if* I ever get married I am having one child, a girl."

He smiled at her. "What if you have a boy?"

"I will definitely have a girl and I am *not* going through child birth more than once."

They continued talking into the early morning until it was time for him to go.

It was the last night before he was to go to the front again. He had walked her from the restaurant to her building.

"Want to come up for tea?"

He hesitated but shook his head. "I'm sorry but I need to run home and shower and change so I can meet my friends."

She nodded sadly. "That's your tradition right?"

"Yeah, and the guys would kill me if I broke it. Listen your sister told me you turn twenty next month right?" She nodded; a bit surprised he knew or cared. He reached into his Chunin vest and took out a small cardboard box and a note in an envelope. "This is for you. It's a bit early, but happy birthday."

She looked at his offering and was deeply touched that he *cared* enough to think of her when he was about to go back to war. "Shikaku you didn't..."

He grinned and waved away her objection. "Hey I wanted to. Now don't open that until your birthday. Good night Yoshino."

"Shikaku," before he could leave she hurried up to him and kissed his cheek. "Come back safe."

He smiled at her. "I'll try, but I can't promise." With that he leapt away.

Five minutes later she was at her table and had opened both the gift and the note. In the box were a pair of gorgeous diamond stud

earrings. The note read:

*Yoshino, I want you to have something beautiful after you return my heart to me. And don't think about refusing my birthday gift or I will be deeply hurt and I know you don't want that. Best wishes, Shika
P.S. I know you didn't wait until your birthday to open this. Shame on you!*

Konoha Hospital, one week before the expected return of Nara Shikaku.

She burst through the door to room 203. There he was, lying on a hospital bed, eyes closed with an IV stuck in his arm. She didn't hesitate, she didn't think. She ran over and threw herself on top of him. With tears flowing she pressed her mouth to his and kissed him desperately. His eyes opened immediately but all he could do was kiss her back. When she finally stopped she pulled her head back a few inches and stared into his bewildered expression.

"Shikaku don't die!" she wailed. Before he could say anything she was kissing him again. She was passionate and desperate and wanted him to know that she couldn't bear, couldn't take losing him.

When she pulled back for air he managed to gasp out, "Yoshino what..."

"Shikaku you can't die! Please I beg you don't die!"

"Woman who told you I was dying? I took some stab wounds but they've already been healed I'm being released tomorrow."

Immediately from the door there came a burst of laughter as Choza and Inoichi finally lost it. Yoshino stared at them. They had come into the restaurant telling her he was in critical condition and might not make it.

" **You bastards!** " She screamed at them. They both stopped laughing as they felt a murderous killer intent filling the room. Being veterans and not being completely stupid they knew when a tactical retreat was called for and ran.

When they were gone from sight Yoshino turned back to Shikaku, who she was still lying on top of. He was grinning at her. She reared back and punched him in the stomach as hard as she could.

"Ow!" He yelled out in real pain. "What the hell was that for woman? I didn't do anything!"

She jumped down off him and turned away as she rubbed her eyes. "Well they're your friends!" So far as she was concerned that was offence enough. When she turned back to him her eyes were dry and she looked furious. "It **never** happened! I didn't kiss you. I didn't say that I wanted you to live. I take it back I take it all back! Oh and here." She reached into a pocket of her bright yellow uniform and threw something at him.

He ducked but it hit him in the chest. When he looked he saw his silver onyx pendant lying on his bed. He looked at the still angry woman in surprise. "Don't I still I owe you about seven more weeks?"

But she shook her head. "So far as I'm concerned you've given me more than you owed me." Her eyes flattened. "But I swear if you tell *anyone* what just happened in here I will track you down and kill you myself." He nodded believing her. With that she stormed out of his room.

Thirty seconds later she stormed back in. "Yoshino what..."

She came over to his side took his head in her hands and swiftly kissed him. She kissed him as passionately and deeply as she had before. As soon as she had finished she turned around and began leaving again. "I'm glad you're all right. Next time you see me in the club ask me to dance."

"I don't know how." He said weakly.

She sent him a look of pure fury from the door and spoke one word with absolute authority and command. "Learn!"

A week later Shikaku came into the restaurant. He spotted her and grabbed her wrist and began leading her outside. "I need to talk to you."

"Hey! I'm in the middle of work!"

"What are you doing?" Her father asked him as he dragged his youngest daughter out the door.

"Sir please consider her to be taking a five minute smoke break."

"My daughter doesn't smoke."

"Good, it's a disgusting habit." He pulled her outside.

"All right what is this about?" She asked.

"I just wanted to give you this in private." From his vest he pulled out a Nara's Heart and held it out to her.

She looked at him in surprise. "After all that you're giving it back to me?"

He rolled his eyes. "Look at the name woman."

She did. In the central band it read, *Yoshino*. She looked at him in surprise. "Does this mean..."

He nodded to her smiling. "It means that I have fallen in love with you, you troublesome woman. If you accept this it means I swear to only love and pursue you for the rest of my days."

She felt the warm tears. "I love you too Shikaku and I accept with all my heart." She carefully took the pendant from him and put it around her neck.

He took her into his arms and smiled at his beautiful troublesome woman. "You know I always thought I would find a nice soft woman, but here I am hopelessly in love with one who can beat me up."

She put her arms around his neck and smiled up at him. "Want to know a secret?" He nodded. "Even the roughest woman is gentle with the man she loves."

They shared a long sweet kiss.

"They were married a year later and they lived happily ever after. Well not completely, but they're pretty happy I guess. Even though mom has dad totally whipped." Shikamaru brought the story to its end.

Temari was sitting up leaning forward with her chin in her hands. "Wow, I've got to say I never thought you had so much imagination."

"It happens to be the truth woman, every word of it."

"Your parents met in a bar?" He nodded. "She made him work in a restaurant cleaning fish?" He nodded again. "And it all happened because of a pendant?"

"That's right."

"You *really* expect me to believe all that?"

He reached beneath his shirt and pulled out a silver onyx pendant with three bands. On the central band she could easily read, *Shikamaru* . "Yes actually."

She reached out and touched his Nara's Heart and smiled. "Good story."

A game of shogi

Author's Note: Thank you to everyone who took the time to review, it is always appreciated. Believe it or not, I wasn't planning to make the last chapter so large. But I have found that on occasion when I am writing the story and characters take on a life of their own. From the response it looks like the last chapter was the most popular one so far. Believe me it is very gratifying to now have 60 reviews and to hear so many people eager for more updates. I will continue to try and have new chapters each week. As for this one, I hope everyone will enjoy it as it contains an event I know a few of you have been waiting for. I also hope that it has at least **one** real surprise. Oh, and I have a message for ThisIsntClair. I asked Shikaku, but he says cleaning is too much of a drag. Sorry. As always please enjoy.

"That never happened!" They were lying side by side on the grass.

He looked at her and smiled. "I swear to you it did."

"You honestly expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth." He sounded bored.

"You're telling me Uzumaki Naruto covered the faces of your Hokage monument with graffiti?"

"If you don't believe me the next time you see Naruto just ask him. Not only will he confirm it he'll *brag* about it."

She looked at him bewildered. "So what happened to him? How was he punished?"

"Iruka made him clean it all up."

She stared at him. "That's *it*?" Shikamaru nodded lazily. "I swear I don't understand you Leaf nins at all! Your village has produced

some of the most powerful ninja in all of history yet I swear you're all as soft as baked bread. How can a village that's so tolerant be so powerful?"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Has it ever occurred to you it's *because* we're tolerant and allow people to be individuals that makes us strong?"

She thought about that. "Maybe, but I still can't understand it. I swear you Leaf nins are so loose with your rules I don't understand how you don't all end up in anarchy."

"We like things the way they are. So what would have happened if Naruto had done something like that here?"

"Public execution."

He stared at her. "You're joking."

She stared back. "No I am not."

"Don't you think that's over the top just for putting some paint on a sculpture?"

"You mean for desecrating a public symbol of the history and honor of Suna? For disgracing the image of one of Suna's immortal heroes?"

"Temari, don't take this the wrong way, but I think you Suna nins take things way too seriously."

She laughed. "We'll chalk it up to different cultures I guess. Maybe it's because we live in an environment that kills soft things. You have to be hard and strong to live here." She looked at him. "So do you have some more stories about Uzumaki?"

"Tons of them, but why are you so interested in him?"

"My family and I owe him a debt. It's because of him that Gaara has changed so much."

"Has he really changed?" He asked cautiously.

"He has." She spoke with conviction.

He knew he was wandering into dangerous ground but he needed to ask. "Did Gaara ever tell you about the run in at the hospital with me and Naruto?"

She had a worried expression. "No, what happened?"

"He was wanting to kill Lee. He would have too except Naruto and I just happened to be there. Fifteen minutes sooner or fifteen minutes later and Lee would be dead now."

"I am sorry." She spoke with a serious tone. "I know what he used to be like. I grew up with him and every single night I would go to sleep terrified he would murder me." Seeing the look on his face she rushed on. "But it wasn't his fault! There are things you don't know about that were done to him. I know he has done horrible things. Believe me Shikamaru I could tell you stories that would curdle your blood. But he really has gotten better and if you just give him a chance you would see it."

He wasn't so sure. "I suppose I'll find out one way or the other."

An uncomfortable silence descended on them.

She suddenly sat up. "I'm bored, this has been wonderful and I want to do it at least once more before you go, but let's do something else."

He sat up as well. "What did you have in mind?"

"You pick, what would like to do with me?" She saw his eyes drift from her face to a part of her body a bit lower. She immediately reached out and smacked him. "Not **that** you disgusting pervert!"

He rubbed that back of his head. "Well you did say..."

"Not until you're fifteen so get it out of your mind!"

He sent her the largest smile she'd ever seen on his face. "Is that a promise?"

She felt herself turning red. Why had she just said that? "We'll see." Shikamaru immediately decided he would have to get calendars for the next two years and figure out *exactly* how many days it was until his fifteenth birthday. He also wondered how angry his mom would be if he were on a mission to Suna on that day. "Anyway what *else* would you like to do?"

"We could take a nap."

"Lazy," she muttered. "Pick an activity that requires consciousness."

"All right, how about we play shogi?"

She tilted her head. "What is it with you and that game?"

"I just like an activity that I know follows the rules of logic and is predictable. Too many things in the world aren't." He smiled at her. "Women for example."

"If I were predictable you wouldn't enjoy my company near so much." She stood up. "Fine, let's go play."

He got up as well and picked up the basket. "I brought a travel set with me; it's back in my hotel room."

She laughed at him. "Why am I not surprised? That's all right there's a set in the house."

They walked out of the garden. At the entrance she performed her sealing jutsu. They then headed back to the house. Just as they got to the door she reached out, grabbed him, and kissed him.

"Uhhh..." He articulated.

"Unpredictable," she laughed and went inside.

On the second floor she led him to a room down a ways from the stairs. On the way they passed one with a wooden sign that said, 'Temari.'

"Is that..."

"You're not getting invited to my room so don't even ask." She gave him a coy smile. "At least not for a couple more years."

He felt a flash of heat. Oh he was definitely spending his fifteenth birthday in Suna even if he had to pay for his own mission here.

She stopped at another door and opened it. "This is the game room."

He looked inside. It was a large room with perhaps a dozen tables with various games set up at them. There was a roulette wheel, four dart boards, a pair of billiards tables with dozens of cue sticks hanging on the wall, some of the tables had cards sitting on them, and there was one with dice. "It certainly is." At a table near the corner he spotted what he'd been looking for. He went over and looked at the shogi board. "This is the nicest board I've ever seen." He wasn't kidding; he picked up the pieces to set up a game. "Are these made of ivory?"

She nodded, feeling a bit embarrassed. "The Kazekage always liked showing off." She took some of the pieces and helped him set the board. "By the way you don't play dice do you?"

He shook his head. "No, dice games are the opposite of shogi, its pure chance what you roll."

She smirked. "Not with some of *those* dice."

"Your father used loaded dice?"

She shrugged. "He didn't like to lose."

He sent her a little knowing smile. "I see it runs in the family."

She sent him a smile of her own as she sat down. "You're going down this time Shikamaru."

He sat down across from her. "I've heard that before."

"Anyone can get lucky once."

"I won five times."

"Anyone can get lucky five times." She looked over the board. "Rock, paper, scissors to see who goes first?"

He shook his head. "Be my guest."

She didn't argue. She moved in a classic rook opening. "There." He moved a pawn without comment. She then advanced her bishop.

"Aggressive." He moved another pawn forward.

She smiled as she moved a pawn this time. "It's the only way to win."

"No, it's not."

Ten minutes later.

"Checkmate." With his knight he took her king.

She glared at him and then at the board. "How the hell did you do that?"

He rolled his eyes. "I've told you before you're too aggressive. The point of the game is to get inside your opponent's defenses and take out the king, it doesn't matter how many pieces you take." Looking at the board she had fifteen pieces to his seven, but he'd still won easily. "Want another game?"

She was about to say yes when a quiet voice came from the doorway. "Actually might I play?" They both looked up to see Gaara entering the room.

A look flashed between brother and sister. Temari gave him just the slightest of nods. "Actually I need to take care of some correspondence, Shikamaru would you mind playing with Gaara?"

She could see the sudden panic in his eyes. She leaned forward and put a hand over his. She mouthed the words; *please, for me* . He knew how much it meant to her that he at least try and get along with her brothers. So despite his better judgment he nodded. "Sure, that would be fine." He began resetting the board.

She stood up. "Well you boys play nice." The words and tone were light but the look she gave her brother told him she meant them. He nodded to her and took her seat at the table. She sent Shikamaru an encouraging smile and then left.

Shikamaru and Gaara were alone in the room.

The two of them looked at one another from across the board. Neither of them felt any great urge to break the silence. Gaara was used to the quiet and Shikamaru actually enjoyed it. With the board ready they both just sat there waiting, taking in the other's measure.

Finally it was Shikamaru who spoke. "Temari and I usually play rock, paper, scissors to see who goes first."

"There is no need, you may go first."

Not wanting to argue the point Shikamaru began with a rook opening as Temari had. "Have you played shogi much?"

Gaara moved one of his pawns. "Not really, Baki taught it to all of us as a way to learn strategic thinking. I only ever play with Baki and Temari."

"What about your brother?" He moved a pawn on the left side of his board.

"Kankuro prefers to play cards." Gaara matched his move.

"Really? Which do you prefer?"

"Shogi." He answered simply.

"Mind if I ask you why?" Shikamaru found himself just a bit curious.

He shrugged. "I prefer battle when it is a test of strength and wit and is not influenced by the draw of a card."

Shikamaru slowly nodded. "When I play I always think of it as a sort of battle with myself as general and the pieces as my soldiers."

Gaara gave him an understanding look. "I also think of it as battle. That is one of the reasons I find it interesting. In real life my power is usually far greater than my opponent's. I find it *interesting* to meet my opponent with exactly the same strength and have the battle decided by wits alone. Also there is far less blood."

That brought the conversation to a grinding halt. For the next few minutes the two of them simply played. The game took on a steady pace as neither player needed that much time to consider their moves. Pieces began to disappear from the board, but it was clear the game would not end quickly.

Shikamaru was forced to sacrifice a knight. "You are much less aggressive than Temari."

"I can be patient when necessary. When you never sleep you develop a keen appreciation for the value of time."

"You never sleep?"

"I have my reasons."

"Does it have anything to do with Shukaku?"

Gaara gave him a look. Shikamaru stared back dispassionately.
"How do you know about that? Did Temari..."

But Shikamaru shook his head. "No, she has never mentioned the fact you have a demon inside you."

"Then how do you know of it?"

"Since the Chunin exams you've been given a very extensive write up in our Bingo Book."

"I see."

"Also I did some research on you when I became *interested* in your sister. It seemed prudent to learn all I could about you."

"How much do you know?"

Shikamaru sat back and began to recite. "Sabaku no Gaara; age: 13, blood type: AB negative, date of birth: January 19, rank: genin, affiliation: Sunagakore, known relatives: son of Yondaime Kazekage, brother of Sabaku no Kankuro and Sabaku no Temari. Distinguishing features: tattoo on forehead with the word, 'love,' abilities: center around jutsus using sand in both offensive and defensive means. Is the know container of the Shukaku one tail demon which grants him the ability to transform into a demonic form and allows for access to vast amounts of chakra. He is to be considered to be an S-ranked opponent and highly dangerous. Is confirmed to have killed seventeen shinobi all with the use of sand for crushing or suffocation. Is also suspected of the death of Sound shinobi Dosu while in Konoha. Has been confirmed to have killed two hundred and thirty six civilians including women and children. Most of these in Suna but in other villages and cities as well. Several outstanding warrants for murder in various lands as well as bounties totaling two hundred thousand ryu for his capture or death." Shikamaru halted for a bit. "There's more, but that covers the highlights."

Gaara nodded and moved a bishop. "All true, though the estimates are a bit conservative. By the way, when you return home you can confirm I did kill Dosu."

Shikamaru took out a lance. "Why? Wasn't he an ally at the time?"

"He wanted to fight me." Gaara said simply. He dropped a pawn onto the board. "Do you love my sister?"

"What?"

"Do you love my sister?"

Shikamaru knew he had to be cautious and considered his answer carefully.

"You should know that I detest liars. So rather than think up a response that you believe I want to hear you would be best served by telling me the truth."

"I have no intention of lying, but the answer isn't a simple one."

"Why not? The question is simple enough."

Shikamaru shook his head. "I haven't had that much experience but one thing I'm sure of is that feelings between men and women are *never* simple."

Gaara frowned slightly and Shikamaru's worries grew. "I don't pretend to really understand love. In that I am still trying to find my way. But it seems to me that either you love or you do not. I am not asking for details or for you to gauge the depth of your feelings. But I *do* wish to know whether or not you love her."

He was feeling more than a little uncomfortable under that measuring stare. "I can't say whether I love her or not, I honestly don't know. I can only tell you that I care for her and have strong feelings for her."

Gaara continued to frown. "Since you cannot say that you love her does that mean you do **not** love her?"

"I didn't say that!"

"So you do love her?"

"No! I mean... I don't know, maybe but..."

"Do you wish to ask her to marry you?"

" **What?!** "

"Shall I repeat the question?"

He stared at the red haired boy as though he were insane. He took a deep breath. *Just how the hell did this conversation get here?* "I have not given **serious** thought to **anyone** becoming my wife. I am sure Temari would be a wonderful wife but I am still too young to begin thinking about that seriously."

"Since you are not considering her for your wife what are you hoping to gain from your relationship with her? Do you just want to use her for sex?"

"What?! Hey I don't know what kind of guy you think I am but I would **never** treat her or any other girl like that!"

"Kankuro does."

"Don't compare me to Kankuro and don't you **dare** compare Temari to the girls he sees! She is the most amazing and wonderful girl I've ever met and I would **never** use her or do anything to hurt her!"

"Interesting."

"What is?"

"I've never had anyone who knew my reputation stand over me glaring."

It was true. Shikamaru suddenly realized that was exactly what he was doing. At some point he'd gotten to his feet and was now staring down the boy who scared the hell out of him. He sat back down. "I'm sorry about that."

"That is all right. I know you are afraid of me. Don't bother denying it, I can read it clearly every time you look at me. But just now you weren't afraid."

He shrugged. "I guess I don't like hearing *anyone* suggest I would treat Temari like that."

Gaara just stared at him for a moment. "You really do care for her don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you say that you love her?"

"Because I don't know whether my feelings are love or not. Love is a powerful word that can break hearts and make otherwise rational people do the most ridiculous things. I don't want to use it until I am sure."

"I see." He paused a bit. "Kankuro and the girls he brings home don't seem to mind using the word."

Shikamaru frowned. "Please don't compare what I feel for Temari to whatever it is Kankuro feels for the girls here. I don't believe he really cares about them and I suspect the girls who say they, 'love' him are just desperate to hold his attention. I knew plenty of girls who would swear up and down that they loved Uchiha Sasuke, even though he never said two words to them."

"So you are saying that even though you *may* love her you will not say it because she matters to you?" Shikamaru nodded. "You also seem to be saying that Kankuro *will* say it because the girls he sees *don't* matter to him?" He hesitated but nodded again. "I find all this to be very confusing."

"Like I said, feelings between men and women are *never* simple."

Gaara slowly nodded. "Perhaps, shall we continue playing? It is your move."

Shikamaru scanned the board. He dropped a bishop that he would use to eliminate one of Gaara's gold generals. "Tell me something Gaara. When we spoke in the hospital you said you were a monster and that you loved only yourself. Has that changed?"

"I am still a monster." He spoke quietly as he moved his general out of harms way. "But I have changed. If I hadn't I wouldn't care about who my sister was seeing." He was silent but then spoke just above a whisper. "I love my sister and my brother."

Shikamaru stared. "Was that hard to admit?" He asked warily. Gaara nodded. "There is nothing wrong or even unusual with loving your family."

"Perhaps not for you or most others, but for me it is an alien concept. My uncle taught me that I was alone and that I could only love and only trust myself."

Shikamaru looked at him in horror. "Your *uncle* taught you that?"

"Yes, I was five and he was the only person who I thought cared about me. Then one night he tried to murder me on the Kazekage's orders. I did not know who it was and mortally wounded him with my sand. But before he died he told me to love only myself. This was just before trying to kill me again by detonating a number of explosive notes he had on his body. That was the night I used my sand to carve this tattoo into my forehead as a permanent reminder

to love only myself." Shikamaru could only stare at him. Gaara tilted his head and *almost* smiled. "I take it that information was not in your Bingo Book?" Shikamaru could only shake his head.

"I am sorry Gaara; I never imagined you had to go through something like that." Temari had told him that things had been done to him. She had not been joking. Hearing what his own uncle had done to a five year old Shikamaru felt the first slight sympathy for Gaara.

"I have dealt with it." He frowned as Shikamaru finally took his general off the board. "My life has been hard but I have learned to accept it. I have decided to try to love others rather than just myself, largely because of Uzumaki Naruto."

"Temari told me it was because of him you decided to change. Has he really had that big an impact?"

"He is the reason I gave my blessing for you to court Temari." Gaara said flatly. "I asked him about you while he was in the hospital. He told me you were a true friend and one of his precious people. Since Naruto thought so highly of you I decided you were deserving of consideration."

Shikamaru shook his head. "If you had told me two years ago I would be grateful to Naruto for his support I never would have believed it. I've known him for years but I never thought of him as more than a loud mouth prankster. We only became close recently while serving on missions together."

"Do you consider him your friend?"

"Yes, after having fought beside him I am proud to call him my friend."

Gaara nodded approvingly. "How well do you know him?"

"Pretty well I suppose, I'm not as close to him as I am with say Chouji or Ino. But we were in the same academy class for four years so I do know a lot." He paused. "I was wondering about something."

"Yes?"

"Well, while I was doing my research on you there was one document I wanted to read that I wasn't allowed access to. When Kakashi sent me, Naruto, and Sakura after Sasuke he declared it to be an A-ranked mission. In the files is a mission report written in two parts by Sakura and Sasuke. I was able to read the part written by Sakura that just covered the pursuit up until they caught up to him. But the second part which I assume describes the fight between you and team seven has been sealed. I asked Tsunade but she told me specifically that it held S-ranked information and that I was not entitled to read it."

"You wish to find out what happened in that battle?"

Shikamaru nodded. "I asked Naruto but he wouldn't say anything. That's unusual; usually the problem is getting him to stop talking about what he did on his missions."

"Very well, what precisely do you wish to know?"

"Just how did team seven defeat you?"

"To begin with I wasn't beaten by a team."

Shikamaru nodded, not really surprised. "Sakura didn't do anything, did she?"

"No, she got between me and my prey and I left her pinned to a tree with sand."

"Your prey?"

"Uchiha Sasuke."

"So how did Sasuke and Naruto defeat you?"

But Gaara shook his head. "Sasuke wounded me twice but by the time Naruto arrived he was out of chakra and helpless. Naruto defeated me alone."

"Alone? I know he's really improved, I've fought with him and I saw him beat Neji. But I didn't think he'd become that powerful."

"You know he can use Kage Bushin?"

"Of course, I've seen him use it several times including in his match with Neji."

"When he fought me he created two thousand shadow clones."

Shikamaru's hand froze over the board. "That's impossible! That jutsu splits your chakra up evenly among the summoned clones. No *one*, not even a Kage, has that much chakra! If you were to split your chakra that far you would collapse immediately from chakra exhaustion."

"If I knew the technique I believe I could split my chakra that much."

"But you're a jinchuriki; you can tap into your demon's chakra. The only way someone could split their chakra that much would be if they were a..."

Gaara calmly looked across the table at him. "Yes?" Shikamaru slowly sat back into his chair, shut his eyes and put his hands together in an, 'O.' "What are you doing?"

"Please give me a moment this helps me to concentrate." Gaara obliged and simply sat there waiting. After five minutes he opened his eyes and looked at Gaara. He held out his hands and began to tick off points on his fingers. "Naruto has always been treated with an unexplainable dislike by the majority of adults in the village. It is a general feeling that borders on and sometimes spills over into

outright hatred. When I asked my parents once why people treated Naruto so badly they refused to explain and simply said there were reasons. Naruto was under the personal protection of the Sandaime. None of us could ever understand why an orphan and a prankster like him got such special treatment from the Hokage. I have heard Sakura and others talk about his incredible healing ability and I've never known him to stay more than one night in the hospital no matter how wounded he was. He has always had an endurance bordering on Jonin level even when he was a small child. During his graduation exam he failed to produce three Bushins, while I later heard the story of how Iruka graduated him because he was able to perform multiple Kage Bushins. The former jutsu is a very low end genin level, while the latter is an extremely powerful jonin level technique. His talent with the latter but not the former would seem to indicate he has immense chakra reserves and finds it easier to use jutsus that require large amounts of chakra. I've spoken with Neji who says that in their match Naruto was able to summon vast amounts of red chakra even after having all his chakra points closed. That should not have been possible. Also there is no explanation on why Naruto had red colored chakra when normal chakra is always blue. Now you say he was able to split his chakra two thousand ways, which again should be impossible. And lastly, I know the dates of birth of all my class mates and his was October tenth, thirteen years ago. That is the date of the Yondaime's defeat of the Kyuubi." Shikamaru sat there with nine fingers extended.

Gaara calmly nodded. "And what conclusion do you draw from all these facts?"

Shikamaru took a deep breath. "Uzumaki Naruto is also a jinchuriki and is in possession of the Kyuubi." Gaara again nodded. "How long have you known?"

"You mean with absolute certainty?" He shook his head. "I don't, even now, but I began to suspect in the hospital when he mentioned he had a monster inside of him. After he defeated me I became convinced it had to be. If you are asking me if he told me or if I have

some absolute proof I do not. But as you point out it seems certain." Gaara leaned back. "So now that you know what will you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your friend and comrade has a monster inside him. Does this change how you feel towards him?" Shikamaru thought about it, and slowly nodded. "I see." Gaara said with some disappointment.

"I understand him better; I finally realize why he had to endure the treatment he did. And I have more respect for him now."

Gaara looked over at him in surprise. "Does that mean you will still be his friend?"

Shikamaru lifted an eyebrow. "Of course, he is the exact same person he has always been and he is my friend. Why would I change how I treat him simply because I've learned about something that has always been there?"

"The adults in your village hate him."

"Not all of them. My parents have never said anything bad about him. There are others; Iruka, Asuma, Inoichi, Choza, Kakashi, Kurenai, Guy, Tsunade, Shizune, Jiraiya, and more do not treat him as anything other than a shinobi of the Leaf. As for the rest I feel sorry for them that they can't see he is not the Kyuubi. I don't see how you can blame someone for something that was done to them over which they had no control."

"I see."

"Besides, I think that will change in time. The crowd *cheered* him when he beat Neji. Perhaps in time as they come to know him their feelings will change."

"Do you really believe that is possible?" Gaara said quietly. "That a whole village can change how they see someone like him?"

"I do, it may take time, it may not be easy, but I believe that you can change the hearts of people."

Gaara looked at him in appreciation. "Thank you."

Shikamaru looked over in surprise. "For what?"

But Gaara simply shook his head.

Their game continued for another ten minutes until Shikamaru was finally able to slip in through Gaara's defenses.

"Checkmate." He looked at Gaara. "That was a very good game."

Gaara nodded. "Yes, I enjoyed it." He stood up from the table.

"Would you like to play again?"

Gaara looked at him. "Are you sure you would not mind?" Shikamaru shook his head and began setting the board up as Gaara sat back down.

Ten minutes later

"Anyone want some lemonade?" They both stopped to see Temari at the door with a tray holding a large pitcher and three glasses.

"Thank you Temari." Gaara said.

"Sounds good," agreed Shikamaru.

She came over to their table. "You two have been up here over an hour." She looked at how many pieces were still on the board. "Are you still playing?"

"We're on our second game." Shikamaru said.

"Really?" She sent Shikamaru a pleased smile. She set the tray down on a nearby table and poured a drink for each of them. She set

one in front of each by and then pulled up a chair and sat down. "Do you mind if I stay and watch?" They both shook their heads.

"So Gaara," Shikamaru said in a friendly tone. "I've heard when you were little you used to carry a teddy bear."

Gaara sent his sister an accusing look. She had an innocent and stunned face. "Don't know where he could have heard that from." She said.

"I see." He turned back to Shikamaru. "It's true I did."

"So what did you call him?"

"His name was Mr. Bear." Shikamaru nodded. "I have heard you used to have a stuffed toy deer as a child."

Shikamaru sent the girl to his right a look of betrayal, only to find her intently studying her nails. "Your mom, tea, girl talk." She murmured.

"Hmmm," he turned his attention back to Gaara. "Yes that's true."

"And what was his name?"

"Cloud."

A giggle escaped from her lips and he sent her an annoyed look.

"Say Gaara, did Temari ever have a favorite toy?"

"What?! Of course I didn't!" Temari snapped.

"She used to carry a large doll with blonde hair with her everywhere." Gaara contradicted.

"Gaara!" She sent her brother a look of horror.

"So what was the doll's name?"

"Don't you dare..."

"Sandy." Gaara replied.

Shikamaru looked at the blonde girl and smiled. "Awww, how cute! Did Temari like playing with her dolly?"

She sent him a dangerous look. "One more word..."

Gaara stood up. "Would you like to see some pictures?"

Shikamaru jumped to his feet. "Absolutely!"

"Hey! Gaara don't you dare show him pictures of me and Sandy!" She got up as well and hurried after them.

Tanya was heading home back to her apartment when a young boy bumped into her.

"Oh excuse me!" The boy said. "Have you seen my dog anywhere?"

She felt an immediate chill. "No, I'm sorry, I haven't."

The boy simply nodded and ran off with shouts for his pet.

Tanya changed direction. Going home would have to wait now. Someone coming up to her and asking her about an animal, that was the prearranged signal. She walked well out of her way and towards one of the seedier neighborhoods of Suna. She hurried into a small run down motel stuck between a couple of bars. She felt sick every time she came here, but what choice did she have? She walked into the empty lobby and was swallowed up by the odor of booze and stale smoke. The man behind the counter recognized her and sent her a leer. She knew what he thought she was and it sickened her.

"There is a room held for Mr. Atoli." She said quietly.

He laughed at her and handed her a key. "Your *boyfriend* is in room twelve just like always."

She nodded and hurried away from him feeling dirty. She came to the door and knocked.

"Enter." She heard the voice and went in. Sitting in a beaten up leather chair looked to be a young man with a dark complexion, not really handsome, not really ugly, dressed in common work clothes. She shut and locked the door and offered him a deep formal bow. When she stood he held out a hand signaling her to remain silent. He quickly cast a sealing jutsu.

"Now we can talk in private." With that he dispelled his henge. There sitting before her in pristine white clothing was Ossama Sulamon, clan head of Ossama and Suna's Director of Internal Security. "Now then," he leaned back and measured her with his calculating eyes. "Tell me everything."

A back up plan

Sulamon sat there and listened to her narrative. He asked a few pointed questions, but was otherwise silent. She was by far one of his most useful agents. She had provided him valuable knowledge on the comings and goings of the Kazekage. Now she was giving him important information on what was becoming a very real threat to Suna.

"When I left Shikamaru was sitting down to have dinner with Temari-sama and Gaara-sama, Kankuro-sama was not at home."

"I see," he said quietly. He was used to hiding his feelings and had no problem keeping his passive exterior. Inside he was worried. This Chunin was sitting down to dinner with *Gaara* ? He had known the current clan head of Sabaku his entire life of course. He had never been one for pleasant meals or conversations. Since the death of the Kazekage and his ascension to clan head he'd had a handful of meals with anyone outside his family. All of them had been centered on important business or ceremony. Yet somehow this Chunin had gotten Gaara to *invite* him to dinner? Of course Temari would have encouraged it, but he knew *no one* could force Gaara to do anything he did not want to. He would need more information before coming to a firm decision. But it was time to move the pieces into the proper position *if* he decided to play them.

He stood up. "You have done very well Tanya and your services are appreciated." He reached into a pocket and took out a thick wad of ryu notes. "Here is 5,000 ryu, which is I believe about two months' pay?" He handed them to her. She accepted them and kept her eyes on the floor. He waited, but she said nothing. "Am I not generous?" He said quietly.

Her face shot up. He was pleased to see the look of fear. "Most generous Sulamon-sama!"

He looked at her without expression. He knew what was going through her mind. He knew what strings to pull with her. He gave her a very small, friendly smile. "Is it perhaps that you would rather have this?" From a different pocket he took out a simple envelope. He held it out so she could see her name was written on it. Of course she recognized the hand writing. Instinctually one hand reached for it, but she drew it back.

"Is that?" There was a strangled hope in her voice.

"A letter from your brother? Yes, it is, I just received it a few days ago." That was a lie. He'd had it for close to two months. But there were no dates on it, no way for her to know when it was written. He had held on to it. It was a piece to be played when she needed some extra motivation. He judged now to be that time. He gave her a slightly wider smile and held it out to her. "Take it by all means Tanya; it is for you after all."

With shaking hands she reached out and took it from him. He watched as she pulled out the single sheet and read the words there. "He says he is being fed and that they are no longer hurting him." Her voice ached with relief, she had tears.

"Even the mist nins can be civilized at times. They know now he has no valuable information. So there is no reason to torture him."

She looked at him with just the faintest glimmer of hope in her eyes. "Does that mean they will let him go?"

He shook his head. "No, of course not."

"Why?" she wailed. "If they know he has nothing to give them why won't they let him go?"

"Because he is a criminal." He said simply.

"A criminal? My baby brother was a shinobi on a mission!"

"He was caught committing an act of espionage in Mist territory."

"But he was just following orders!"

"Orders from whom?" The man said coldly. "Surely you do not suggest he was ordered to spy by the legal authorities of Suna? Spying is considered an act of war, and *of course* the five great villages would *never* spy on each other."

"So Suna will just abandon him?" She asked bitterly. "He will just be left to rot in a Mist prison?"

"Every shinobi understands the risks they face. Your brother knew he might be called upon to make a sacrifice for the greater good of his village." He saw the frustration and the look of hopelessness. It was exactly what he wanted. "However..." A look of interest flashed to her face at the sound of that one word. "Something might be arranged."

"What?" She tried to keep the eagerness from her voice but couldn't.

"A mist nin was recently captured by us under similar circumstances and is currently enjoying our hospitality. He is a very powerful Jonin and the authorities in Mist have made it clear they are prepared to exchange all prisoners for his return." He saw the sudden look of real hope and gave her a few seconds to let it grow. He had given, now he would take away. "Unfortunately, all the prisoners they hold are Genins without any special or unique abilities. Not only is this Jonin powerful, he may have access to valuable information. Information that will take time to squeeze out."

She ground her teeth. "If he were noble you would move heaven and earth to save him."

"That is true." He saw no reason to pretend otherwise. "But he is not. Yet, if I were to receive a service of some very great value that *might* warrant making the exchange."

"What service?" She asked, torn between hope and despair.

He proceeded to tell her in detail just what he had in mind. "Were you to do this for me I would be extremely grateful and your reward would be your brother's freedom."

She looked at him in horror. "I can't do that! I can't help you murder someone."

"Why not?" She could only stare open mouthed at him. "What I will actually require of you will be very simple, and will only take a few minutes of your time. I do not expect you to perform the actual killing."

"Blood will still be on my hands."

"So you would not kill to rescue your brother from his cell?"

She shut her eyes and sobbed. "Don't ask me that please! Isn't there any other way?"

"When a new Kazekage is chosen you can petition him. How much good that will do you I cannot say. But that is unlikely to occur for a year or more. In the meantime, as Director of Internal Security I alone have the authority to approve prisoner exchanges. I am the *only* one who can have your brother released and returned home." He recast his henge, showing her their time was at an end. "All this is merely a contingency; I will need more information before choosing the proper course of action. I do not require an answer yet, but think well on what I have said." He dispelled the sealing jutsu. "You may go."

She gave him a formal bow and wasted no time in fleeing.

"Wow, you sure were cute as a kid." He teased her.

She gave him a flat look. "You know I've seen your baby pictures."

He shrugged. "I'm not surprised, mom loves showing those." He was not going to mention the little fact he had used his camera on some of the pictures he'd seen of her. He would save that for the next time she visited him.

"If you tell anyone about the doll I am going to kill you."

He smiled at her. "I would never tell." *Showing* would be so much more fun.

"Fine, good night." She turned around and started heading back to the house.

"No kiss good night?" He sounded hurt.

She turned around and faced him with her arms crossed. "Do you really think you *deserve* a kiss?"

"You mean after making that huge effort to get along with your brother, the one who has a reputation for killing people he doesn't like?"

She had to admit he had a point. She went over to the gate. "I suppose I do have to thank you for that."

He smirked at her. "Is that the only reason?"

"No." She kissed him. She had meant to give him just one, but he put his arms around her and refused to let her go. Not being too upset by that she gave him a few more, before gently pulling away. "Lunch tomorrow?"

"I'll be here by noon."

"Be here by eleven or you don't get anything to eat."

He shook his head and laughed. "It's troublesome but I'll be here by eleven." He headed out the gate.

She went back inside where Gaara was waiting. He was too polite to watch as they said good bye. "He is very interesting."

She nodded her agreement. "I've always thought so."

"He refused to say that he loved you. But he did say he cared for you, and I believe him."

She smiled. "That's enough for right now." She went up to bed happy with the world.

Back at the hotel Shikamaru spotted a familiar figure sitting in the hotel restaurant. He decided to stop in and join his friend. As soon as he approached the table he knew something was seriously wrong. Chouji was just sitting there glumly staring at an entire plate *full* of barbecue.

"Hey Chouji." He sat down at the table.

Chouji looked up and nodded. "Hey Shika, how did things go? Have you been with Temari this whole time?"

"Yeah," a waitress came over and he put in an order for tea. "Things went surprisingly well, I'll tell you about it later. What's wrong?"

"What? Nothing's wrong." He replied glumly.

Shikamaru smiled. "Well in that case would you mind if I have the rest of your food?"

He had been joking, but Chouji pushed the plate towards him. "Here."

He stared at his friend. "Chouji what's wrong, are you sick?"

He shook his head. "I'm just thinking of going on a diet."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I'm fat." He said simply.

He could not believe that Chouji had just used *that* word. "No you're not, you're just pleasantly plump."

He sent his best friend a grateful little smirk. "Thanks Shika but we both know the truth. I'm not plump or big boned, I'm just plain fat. I'm fat and disgusting and no girl would ever want to be seen with me." They were both silent as the waitress brought over the tea. "She is on a date right now." He said quietly.

"Ino?"

Chouji nodded and just stared at the table. "One of the boys she danced with asked her and of course she said yes. She spent a whole half an hour telling me how excited she was."

"You can't get depressed over this, it doesn't mean anything."

"It means she'd rather go out with a guy she just met than with me." He lifted his eyes. "You know you're really lucky to have a girl like Temari who wants to be with you."

He tried to lighten the mood. "You can say that, but you've never had her hit you with her fan."

"But you're not sorry you came here though, are you?" Shikamaru shook his head. "I watched how other guys came up to you two and how she kept telling them no. You don't know how lucky you are."

"I know I'm lucky."

"Do you want to hear something really funny?"

"Sure."

"I really thought that now that Sasuke was gone that I might actually have at least a chance to go out with her. I thought that maybe she would start to see me as more than a friend. I thought that if she

knew I was a good guy, if she knew she could trust me, if she knew I would never ever do anything to hurt her, that maybe, just maybe, her feelings might turn into something more. But she'd rather go out with some guy who's a complete stranger because he's, 'cute just like Sasuke.' That's how she put it, kind of says it all doesn't it?"

"Chouji, you are a hundred times better than that traitor! If Ino can't see that then it's her loss."

"Thanks Shika, you've always been my best friend and I appreciate it."

"Chouji you are the best. Don't let it bother you that Ino can't see that. Someday you are going to meet a girl who will appreciate you and all this won't matter anymore."

He nodded. "I just wish it didn't matter now. Do you know what I am Shika?"

"A good guy."

He grinned. "I'm a back up plan. I'm the last option when there are no better choices. When she needs me I'm there, and when she doesn't I get forgotten. And seriously, what girl wants to have to date her back up plan?" Chouji stood up from the table. "Good night Shika, I'm going to bed."

He waited outside her door. One thing no one could ever say about him was that he lacked patience. He simply sat down and relaxed. Patient or not he was surprised to still be sitting there well after midnight. It was close to one when he saw the elevator doors open. Ino came spilling out, her arms wrapped around an older and taller boy. She walked unsteadily and had to lean against him to keep from losing her balance. By the look on his face the boy didn't seem to mind. Grunting Shikamaru stood up and took out his camera.

"Smile." He snapped a picture and made the camera disappear.

"Huh? Shikamaru, what are you doing here?" A smile split her all ready blush face. "Are you jealous?"

Ignoring her he looked at the boy. "Go home."

The boy was older and bigger. He frowned at Shikamaru and stood taller. "Who are you?"

He smiled. "Me? I'm a Chunin from Konoha and the teammate of the girl you've got your arm around. I'm also pissed off so you had better leave."

"I don't..."

Shikamaru pulled a kunai and without effort tossed it at him. The boy's eyes expanded and he put his hand to the cheek that had been barely cut. In the back of his mind he imagined Anko would be proud. "You a ninja?"

"Shikamaru! What are you doing?!" Ino demanded.

Both boys ignored her. "No." The suddenly cautious local answered.

"In that case you had better go home. Believe me when I say you don't want to mess with me right now."

The boy sent Ino a regretful look before nodding and going back to the elevator.

Ino glared at her teammate and crossed her arms. The effect was somewhat diluted by her swaying. "What the hell was that?"

Shikamaru frowned at her. "Are you drunk?"

"No! I only had a couple glasses of wine!"

"You're thirteen you shouldn't be drinking."

"Who the hell are you, my dad?! You're the same age."

He nodded. "That's right and I've never had alcohol."

"Well good for you! I actually have a social life and I've had sake and beer before. This was just the first time I ever tried wine." She smiled and tapped her hitai-ite. "Besides, we're all adults *right*?"

"With you I wonder. Does your dad know?"

She shook her head. "So what? You're going to use that as some fresh dirt on me?" He was always threatening to release one of the *many* pictures he had taken of her over the years.

"No, I have enough of those. I think I'll give your dad this along with an explanation of the circumstances it was taken under."

She gaped at him and suddenly seemed much more sober. "You wouldn't!"

"Wrong Ino! I am **more** than pissed off enough to do exactly that. What the hell are you thinking inviting someone you barely know up to your room?"

"Oh! I like that! This from the boy who spends all day and night with the sand bimbo!"

"There's a difference."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, Temari has never tried to get me drunk and take advantage of me." With those words came several hilarious one liners, but now was not the time.

"I am not drunk it wouldn't have been taking advantage!" He just stared at her. If it were possible her face would have gotten darker. "I don't mean it that way! We wouldn't have done anything more than a little making out."

He shut his eyes and tried to reign in his anger. "Ino you need to have a talk with Chouji."

"Chouji? Why, what's wrong?"

"He is hurt, and you're the one who has hurt him."

She looked at him in shock. "What do you mean? What did I do?"

"You took him to the dance and then you spent the rest of the night ignoring him."

"I would never ignore him! I just spent most of the night talking with other boys!"

"You know Ino, in some ways you're about as clueless as Naruto. Let me spell this out for you. Chouji likes you."

"I know that, I like him too."

"No, I mean he *likes* you in the way you wish Sasuke had."

She nodded. "I know he has a crush on me, I think it's sweet. But he knows I don't like him in the same way."

"So you've known about his feeling all along?" She nodded. "Then why are you leading him on? Why are you giving him hope when he has no chance with you?"

"Hey! I've never led him on! I've never told him I wanted to date him or that I was interested in him in that way."

"No, you just ask him out to a dance and then drop him the second someone else comes along." She stared at him obviously not getting it. "Ino tomorrow you are sitting down with Chouji and explaining to him that he will never be more than a friend to you. Afterwards you will **never** ask him to bring you to a party or dance or anything else that might resemble a date." She opened her mouth. "And if you

don't your father gets that picture along with an explanation. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "Ok Shikamaru I'll do that, but I don't get why you're so angry. What did I do?"

He shook his head. "Ino I am going to tell you something that Chouji should have but never would. Yamanaka Ino you are a complete and utter bitch." With that he went to his room to get some sleep.

She stayed in the hallway and stared at his closed door. They'd had plenty of fights, plenty of arguments over the years. But he had never ever called her anything like that. She got into her room and hurried over to the bed. She curled up on the bed and slowly cried herself to sleep.

A very big mistake

He lifted his empty glass. The waitress nodded and hurried to get him another.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" The older man next to him spoke.

Ossama Senya looked at him and grinned. "Tybal-sensei, couldn't you just be my friend and not my sensei for once?"

He shook his head. "As both your friend and your sensei I am telling you three glasses of wine this early is three too many." He frowned as the waitress as the waitress set down another glass and took away the empty. The girl didn't notice as she was focused on his student. Senya gave her a friendly smile as she left. The girl was returning the attention.

"Now what was I saying again?"

"You were telling me about your tragic luck with women." The older man said flatly.

Senya suddenly nodded and took a fresh drink of red wine. "I swear you should have seen it! She spent the whole night dancing with and smiling at this *boy* . It was disgusting."

Tybal took a sip of his tea. "And just why was it disgusting for a girl to be dancing with a boy again?"

"She is not just any girl! She is..."

"Sabaku no Temari, first daughter of House Sabaku, daughter of the Kazekage, and the most precious desert rose." He repeated the tired litany. "But again, why is it a problem that she was dancing with someone?"

"I am courting her." He said stubbornly.

"You and half of Suna, it's not like the two of you are betrothed. Tell me, how many *other* girls are you courting?"

"About a dozen."

"Did you dance with any of them?"

He shrugged. "Five or six, but I *wanted* to dance with her. Just one dance and she refused me!"

"You couldn't get something you wanted, how very tragic." He knew his sarcasm was being wasted. "You know I honestly don't understand you nobles and the production you make out of finding a wife. When I met Asrial I knew she was the one. I asked her father's permission, I courted her, and **only** her, I asked her to marry me, she said yes, and here we are a dozen years and three children later."

"Tybal-sensei, you know I have the greatest respect for you. But you are not of noble blood."

"Praise Kami!"

He shot his sensei an annoyed look. "There are certain traditions that must be respected. Even if she does like this foreigner she still should have given me one dance."

"Why? Because it's what you wanted? She's a woman not a carriage; you can't just expect her to do whatever you'd like. Believe it or not women do occasionally think for themselves, it's shocking but true."

"Why wouldn't she want to dance with me?" He saw Tybal open his mouth. "Don't answer that!" His sensei laughed at him. "You know it wouldn't be so bad if it were the Daimyo's heir or some great lord or prince she'd been dancing with. But she preferred a foreign Chunin over me. How can I not take offense?"

Tybal shook his head. "You know it seems to me things would be simpler if you just put the girls up on an auction block and let everyone bid on them. That way you could find out who could pay the highest price and just be done with it. Think of all the time and effort that would save! Just the savings on chocolates and flowers alone would be enormous!"

Senya shot him a frown. "You are mocking noble tradition."

He smiled back. "I'm a commoner it's what we do."

"Why do I keep hanging out with you sensei?"

"Because I'm your sensei and you are filled with admiration and respect for me." The younger man made a rude noise. "Also being around a mere commoner such as myself is probably a nice change of pace for you."

"That I'll grant."

"Seriously now, why are you so hung up on Temari? You've had dinner together exactly once right? And that was arranged by the Kazekage. She hasn't accepted any of your invitations since, she hasn't shown any interest in you at all above what's considered customary. Face it; she wasn't going to choose you. So what does it matter who she ends up choosing?"

"It matters because I want her and I can't stand the thought of losing her to an idiot boy from the Leaf." He looked at his sensei. "Be honest, do *you* want to see her marry a foreign nin, given what it means?"

"Well no, not especially, it does seem rather strange coming outside an alliance between the two villages." He shrugged. "But it's not *technically* illegal now is it? She can marry anyone she wants, even if her choice is a bit odd." Senya grunted and drank down some more wine. Tybal had been trying all morning, without success, to get his former student's mind off of Temari. He tried again. "You

know Temari isn't the only gem in the mine. Aren't you also courting Caulderon no Celia? She seems to really like you and she's certainly easy on the eyes."

"Celia? Oh that hunt's over with." He shrugged dismissively.

"What do you mean?"

"Her parents informed my family yesterday that they were ready to accept my proposal."

"That's great! Congratulations!" He slapped his young friend on the back, but Senya merely looked annoyed. "Aren't you happy?"

"No, my father wants to accept but I've asked him to wait."

Tybal stared at him open mouthed. "Why? She's beautiful, intelligent, of noble blood, a powerful kunoichi, and best of all she likes and wants you. What more could you possibly ask for?"

"Sabaku no Temari," he replied.

Tybal shook his head in despair. "You know Senya, I love you, but you really are a spoiled brat at times. No one gets *everything* they want, not even the Kazekage or the Daimyo. Human wants are limitless; the material world is anything but. You should be thrilled that you get damn near everything your heart desires and not grouse about the occasional exceptions."

"If she gave me a chance I know I could win her over." Senya insisted. His former sensei shook his head, tired of trying to shine light into such darkness. Then Senya spotted something. "Oh! Kami is too generous!" He gulped down the last of his wine, tossed down some ryu notes and fled out of the café.

Tybal watched him go; wondering what had set a fire under him. He saw him hurry down the street and begin yelling at someone. Tybal jumped to his feet. "Senya, for the love of Kami don't do anything

stupid!" He could only watch as he did something stupid. "Ah damn it!" He ran out of the café.

Shikamaru was headed towards the Sabaku mansion when he sensed a killer intent coming from behind him. A blonde haired Suna Jonin ran up to him. "You Leaf nin! What the hell do you think you're doing with Temari?"

He could obviously see the man was furious but he didn't know why. He decided to give an honest answer, but give it as politely as possible. "She and I are dating."

That was evidently the wrong answer as the man punched him in the face knocking him down. Shikamaru was surprised to find himself in a fight for no reason he could see. The Jonin was standing over him; he got onto his side and swung his feet taking out the man's legs below the knees. The Suna nin was down only a second, he rolled back up to his feet and into a taijutsu stance. Shikamaru stood a few feet away ready to fight. He knew this was bad. He was being attacked for no apparent reason by a local Jonin while in a foreign country. This could get very ugly.

Senya smiled down at the boy. He was going to show Temari just how pathetic and weak this Leaf nin was, and how unworthy of her attention. "I am going to enjoy this." He sent his opponent a nasty smile.

But before he could move he felt a vicious punch cracked into the back of his head. He dropped like a puppet with strings cut and everything went black.

Shikamaru remained in a fighting stance. He was completely confused as to what was going on. A second Suna Jonin had just attacked the first and knocked him out. With the first one down the second one turned to him.

"I have no idea what this is about, but I will defend myself."

But the second ninja made no move to attack him. Instead he offered him a hasty bow. "My humble apologies to you sir, I beg you to forgive, my friend has had too much wine for so early in the day and it has led him to such a disgraceful act. Please believe me that we men of Suna are civilized and are not in the habit of attacking others without cause."

Yes you are! He thought unkindly, remembering the attack on Konoha. "I recognize him now; he was at the festival wanting to cut in. His name is Senya isn't it?"

The other man nodded as he put his comrade over his shoulder. "If you will excuse me I think it would be best that I take him away from here before he wakes up. Again I apologize to you for his behavior." With that the man leapt away.

Shikamaru watched him go without comment. His face hurt like hell, but otherwise he was fine. What had happened was troubling though. He suspected that there would be more to come.

Temari was staring at him.

"What?" He asked unconcerned.

"What happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

She grabbed his arm and led him down the main hall to a spot where a mirror hung. She pointed to his image in the mirror. "I mean *that*."

He could see his face and the large bruise that covered most of the left part of it. "It was nothing, I fell and..."

"Don't you dare lie to me! I've been in enough fights to know a bruise from a punch when I see one! Who did this to you?"

He tried to give her an apathetic answer. "It's not a big deal."

She crossed her arms and glared at him. "Who did this?"

"Temari I think you should let this go. It would..."

"Shikamaru I am not letting this go and you are **not** going to lie to me. Now tell me who did this."

He hadn't known her long but he recognized that look. She was not going to let this go. With a resigned sigh he told her. "It was Senya from the festival."

She looked very surprised, but nodded. "Wait here a minute and I'll get something for the bruise." She headed toward the stairs.

"Temari it would be best to just let this go."

"I'll be back in a minute." She hurried up the stairs.

She was going to get some medicinal cream for him, but there was something more important she needed to do first. She found her youngest brother in the hall near his bedroom. "Gaara."

"Yes Temari?"

"There is something important I need to talk to you about."

Senya couldn't help but remember the time he was nine and had been caught stealing candy. Then he had been forced to stand in his grandfather's office silently and wait to be punished. He remembered how the long wait had been so much worse than the punishment itself. He thought about what he had done, and was willing to admit it had been stupid. Too much wine, too much frustration, and just too tempting an opportunity. He had wanted to beat down that stupid boy and have Temari really understand just how unworthy he was of her. How could Temari not want him? How could she prefer a weak boy

from another village? He just couldn't understand it. He was Ossama no Senya and one day he would be the head of his House. He *deserved* to marry Temari. In all things he deserved the best.

The door to the office opened and his grandfather entered. It only took one look at his grandfather's face to confirm he was in real trouble.

"Grandfather I..."

"Address me by my proper title." He cut him off.

"Sulamon-sama, I most humbly apologize for my behavior."

His grandfather shook his head in disgust as he sat down at his desk. He did not invite him to sit. "Grandson you are an idiot. Perhaps we should have let you become a carpenter instead of a shinobi, for I swear I am tempted to strip you of your hitai-ite and disown you."

Senya looked at him in cold terror. He knew his grandfather well, and he was serious. To be stripped of rank and disowned was a fate worse than death. He bowed deeply and spoke quickly. "Sulamon-sama I *do* apologize and will do whatever is required of me to make amends for my actions. However, surely my actions would not warrant so *extreme* a punishment."

"You think not?" Sulamon answered coldly. "Do you truly understand what you have done?"

"I started a fight with another ninja."

His grandfather stared at him in disbelief. " **You idiot!** " Senya felt really afraid now. His grandfather was not one for emotional displays. If he was this angry then this was even more serious than he thought. "Do you think this is just another one of your stupid bar room brawls? Do you think you are in my office simply because your behavior has embarrassed the family name *again* ? You are shinobi,

you were trained to look underneath the underneath, how is it you are *still* so simple minded? Does your wine stained mind even comprehend that you might have started a war?"

"A war?" He said in disbelief.

"Yes, a war." Sulamon confirmed. "Whatever else he may be grandson, he *is* shinobi of the Leaf and therefore a representative of that village. Attacking him is equivalent to attacking their village. What is even worse is the fact that you did this *publicly* in broad daylight in front of dozens of witnesses. You can be certain that by tomorrow the entire village will be talking of this and by next week their Hokage is likely to know of it, if not sooner. If this had happened *without* observers there might be some doubt. As it is she *will* know one of her Chunin was attacked by a Suna ninja."

"Sulamon-sama I only hit him once! Surely *that* is not enough to begin a war."

"Tell me something idiot grandson. Did you *intend* to hit him only once? Or was that due to the fact your sensei was there and *he* understood what was happening?"

Senya looked down at the floor. "I wasn't going to kill him; I just wanted to beat him up." He mumbled.

"What was that?" Sulamon spoke sharply.

He brought his eyes back up. "Sulamon-sama, I would not have killed him. I only wished to beat and humiliate him."

"Why? Why would you wish to do such a stupid thing?"

"Sulamon-sama I wished to impress Temari with his weakness and my own strength."

Sulamon shut his eyes and shook his head. "Idiot, idiot, idiot, my grandson is an idiot." He opened his eyes and looked at him with

disappointment. "Where do you get this stupidity from? My son was always clever, your mother is intelligent and the soul of civilized behavior, none of your brothers or sisters act in such a shameful manner. Why do you insist on being the family disgrace?" Senya was wise enough to keep his mouth shut. "Do you know I have been trying to arrange a marriage between Gaara and your cousin Alysa?"

"Yes, Sulamon-sama, the entire family knows."

"Do you really believe I would be trying to do that if I thought there were *any* chance Temari would want to marry you?" Despite the circumstances he stiffened at the way his hopes were so casually dismissed. Sulamon noticed that and smiled. "Oh, so that's it? You've got your eyes set on Temari and you think she is still in reach do you?"

"Sulamon-sama I..."

"Forget Temari," he said coldly. "Even if this Leaf nin were not involved she would still never be yours. She would simply marry the Daimyo's eldest son. That is a connection that even we cannot match. So set aside all foolish hopes about Temari, she is lost to you."

"Yes, Sulamon-sama."

His grandfather stared at him. "As I said your actions *might* have sparked off a war had you seriously hurt him or even killed him. As it is, this should be nothing more than an embarrassing incident. But I think you should be aware of just who it is you attacked. Tell me, do you even know his name?"

"No, Sulamon-sama."

"His name is Nara Shikamaru; he is the heir to the Nara clan and was the only Konoha ninja to be promoted from the previous Chunin exams. He is reported to be a personal favorite of the Lady Tsunade's. *That* is who you attacked, the heir to one of Konoha's

most respected clans and one of their Hokage's preferred agents. *That* is who you intended to humiliate in public. Do you begin to understand what the consequences might have been had Tybal-san not intervened? Even had Lady Tsunade declined to start a war over it, it would certainly have been an ugly incident and would have harmed our relations." His eyes narrowed. "And you grandson would very likely be sitting in a cell right now."

Senya paled. "I understand the degree of my mistake Sulamon-sama. I was not aware of his importance to his village."

Sulamon shook his head. "I would suggest that before launching an attack you first gather information."

At that moment there was a knock on his door. The door was then opened by the only person who could do so and get away with it. His wife of forty years poked her head in. "Pardon me dear, but Lord Gaara and is asking to speak to you."

"Gaara? Please invite him in dear." She nodded and spared her grandson a look of sympathy before retreating. Sulamon looked over to his grandson. "Stand there and do not say a word unless you are addressed by either me or Gaara. Also, if he is here to kill you don't resist, it will only make your death harder."

Senya stared at him, he was *not* joking.

Gaara entered and closed the door behind him. He looked at Sulamon and then let his eyes drift to where Senya was. He turned back to Sulamon and ignored the other completely. He gave a deep formal bow. "Sulamon I thank you for meeting with me here in your home."

He returned the bow. "Of course Gaara, you are always welcomed here. Shall I presume this is in relation to the unfortunate *incident* of this morning?"

He nodded. "It is, I am here in my role as clan head of Sabaku to inform you that Ossama no Senya has been removed from the list of candidates for Temari's hand in marriage. She asks that he no longer attempt to contact her." His eyes shifted to the other man. "Should he make *any* attempt to contact her there *will be* serious repercussions." Senya wanted to argue, but the look in Gaara's eyes was more than enough to keep him silent.

"I see." Sulamon spoke gravely. "Removing someone from the list is a grave insult not only to the suitor, but to his family. Is it really your intent to insult my clan Gaara?"

Gaara focused on the older man. "No, it is my intent however to make it clear that Temari wishes nothing more to do with him. He attacked another suitor and that is unacceptable behavior."

Senya clamped down on his jaw. There was so much he wanted to say, but he didn't dare.

"I agree his behavior was wrong and he *will* be punished for it. However, to remove him from the list would discredit and shame him."

Gaara nodded. "That is Temari's wish."

"I see." He said quietly. "It just so happens that this is immaterial, he was about to remove his name from the list as he is to be betrothed to Caulderon no Celia. Would Temari be satisfied by allowing him to withdraw his name voluntarily?"

Gaara considered it. "I believe that would be acceptable on the condition that he never try to contact her again. My sister was most specific on that one point."

"That I think I can guarantee." He gave Senya a sharp look. "Please extend to both your sister and to Shikamaru the apologies of my House."

"I will." He turned to leave. "I thank you for your time. I will show myself out."

Once Gaara left Sulamon turned to his grandson. "Congratulations on your engagement, the two of you will be betrothed by the end of the week." He said sardonically.

"Yes, Sulamon-sama."

"You need not look so sour. As I said you were *never* going to marry Temari. Celia was always the most likely and best choice. She is a wonderful girl and if you are luckier than you deserve you may grow to love her just as I have loved my wife."

"Yes, Sulamon-sama." His expression remained unchanged.

The fool still wants Temari. Sulamon shook his head in mild despair. Senya was a crushing disappointment to him. The boy had so much raw talent; he had vast chakra reserves and great physical strength. He had the potential to be clan head one day. But he had still not grown up and Sulamon was wondering if he ever would. He was still a child who wanted what he wanted and got upset whenever he was denied something. He understood the privileges of being nobility all too well. What had escaped him was the other side of it, the *responsibility* that came with his birth. Despite the many lessons he'd been given over the years he remained the same spoiled child.

"When was the last time you went on a patrol?"

Senya looked at him in surprise. "Not since I was still Genin, Sulamon-sama."

He gave the young man a smile without a hint of warmth. "Well then, high time we change that. You are going out on a three day patrol as part of a two man unit. I have already spoken with your sensei and he has agreed to go with you. Be sure to thank Tybal-san, not only has he agreed to this but it is only because of his actions that you are not in far worse trouble."

"Yes, Sulamon-sama."

"You may consider this as a mere prelude to whatever punishment I decide on. When you return from your patrol you will come directly to this house, and remain here until I see you. If I learn you have stopped at any bars before returning home I will add to your punishment. Do I make myself clear?"

"As crystal, Sulamon-sama."

"In that case you are dismissed. Get to your room and gather whatever you need. You will be leaving with your sensei within ten minutes."

"Yes, Sulamon-sama." He bowed low, his grandfather did not respond. He left to hurry and get ready.

"Thanks for the cream." He said.

She nodded. "It's very good; the bruise should be completely gone within the hour."

He smirked at her. "You know you don't have to look so worried. I'm not so fragile that one punch is going to break me."

"I'm sorry about this." She said quietly.

He gave her a wide smile. "Hey, you weren't the one who hit me, *this* time."

"I'm serious, this happened because of me."

"I don't remember you being there." She gave him a look. "Look, I ran into a guy who was a jerk, it happens."

"But it wouldn't have except for me."

He shook his head. "No, it happened because he was a jerk, and jerks like him don't need a reason." He put his arms around her and pulled her over to him on the sofa. "Don't worry about it."

She looked at him seriously. "I don't want you to be hurt because of me."

He gently caressed her cheek. "Temari," he said softly. "I'll be fine."

She pressed her face against his hand. "Promise?"

"Promise."

A special file

Temari looked into the mirror at the unhappy girl's image. "What's wrong Tanya? You seem depressed."

The girl suddenly stopped brushing and offered a weak smile. "It's nothing."

Temari turned around to look at the girl. "Does it have to do with your brother?"

She nodded. "I received a letter from him."

"That's wonderful! How is he?"

"As well as he can be... considering."

Temari nodded. "I am very sorry for what he has had to endure. Gaara sent a letter of protest but..."

Tanya nodded. "But it was ignored; I appreciate his effort on my behalf though."

"Don't lose hope, he's still alive that is the most important thing."

"He has been trapped there for over a year."

"I know, if Gaara becomes Kazekage then perhaps something can be done." She turned back around and Tanya began brushing her hair again.

"Yes, *if* he becomes Kazekage. But that will not happen anytime soon will it?"

"You have to keep hope that something can be done."

Tanya nodded. "Temari, may I ask you something?"

Temari smiled at her favorite maid. "Of course."

"If your brothers were trapped in a Mist prison, would you kill to free them?"

"Yes," the answer came without the slightest hesitation. "I'd slaughter as many mist nins as I had to to get them out."

"But... what if the person you killed wasn't an enemy?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if the only way to free them was to kill someone who was completely innocent and had nothing to do with their situation?"

"Would killing this person free my brothers?"

"Yes it would."

"Then I would kill him." The answer again came without hesitation. "I have killed Tanya, and I know that taking a life is never easy. But if it means saving someone I love then I will do it."

"Even if the person is completely blameless and innocent?"

"Yes, if it is to protect the ones I love. I'm not saying that it's right or just. But the world is a hard place and some times we must do hard things to protect what we love." She turned around again. "Why are you asking me this? You're not thinking of doing something stupid like actually going to Mist are you?"

She gave Temari a reassuring smile. "No! Of course not! I'm not even kunoichi, what could I do?"

Temari nodded and turned back again. "Don't lose hope Tanya, as long as he is alive there is hope."

She nodded. "I know there is." She looked into the mirror and seemed to relax. "So what do you have planned with Shikamaru today?"

Temari smiled and relaxed. "He's meeting me here but I'm taking him to my favorite restaurant then we're going to spend the day all around the village."

"Sounds like great fun." Tanya brushed out her hair and made sure to store away every detail for later.

The department of Internal Security took up much of the third floor of the Tower of Wind. In some ways it was simply another piece of Suna's bureaucracy. It functioned fairly well, if not with extreme efficiency. It had files and offices and busy administrators who often felt themselves to be overworked and overwhelmed. In some ways they were no different than the department of Licenses and Permits that shared the third floor with them. Of course the latter never ordered the assassination of foreign officials.

In a simple corner office Ossama Sulamon sat behind his desk. Unlike his grandson he was not a man who required excessive displays. Outside his door was written his name and the simple title; Director of Internal Security. The words had remained unchanged since he'd first been appointed to the position eighteen years ago by the new Kazekage. He did not shy away from hard work and often spent long hours going over reports and making difficult decisions. Over the years he had lost track of just how many deaths he had ordered, how many lives ruined, or how many innocent people he had sent to prison. He never lost sleep over any of it. If asked he would have replied that he was a loyal patriot of his village and always acted in the best interests of Suna. He would have spoken without lying, for it was what he believed. In his long life he had always acted to protect his clan and his village. He had destroyed many lives while guarding each. It was the way of the world that power, not justice, was what mattered. His actions were always based on that premise.

He looked from the report on his desk up to Captain Yura. "Is this genuine? On the face of it it does seem rather ridiculous. *Why* would four blacksmiths wish to attack Gaara?"

"Our sources in Takumi village do not know the purpose but the intention seems certain."

" *Seems* certain? Do these idiots even know Gaara's reputation?" Yura nodded. "I simply find it hard to believe that these blacksmiths could be so deluded or so suicidal as to plan to come here to attack Gaara."

"I can certainly understand that, however their intentions do appear clear. Also Director, while Takumi is an artisan village specializing in weapons manufactures these four *are* ninja."

"I disagree, what they are is a waste of time." He looked down at the report again. This Jin idiot probably had some crazy convoluted plan to gain great power. How many idiots like this had he dealt with over the years? There seemed a never ending supply of fools with both ambition and too much imagination. "Normally I would ignore this, especially given how shorthanded we are." He looked at the report again, and sighed. "However with the current situation as *delicate* as it is I don't suppose I can risk allowing these fools to make the attempt." He took a blank piece of paper and began scribbling on it. When it was done he signed and sealed it. "Here," he handed the mission order to Yura. "Have them and all known associates killed. I've assigned it as a B-rank so allocate one of our better teams to it." Yura simply put the paper into his folder and nodded. "Now what can you tell me about this new organization?"

The captain frowned. "Very little I'm afraid. They appear to be a highly organized group of missing nins, most of them either A or S ranked. They call themselves Akatsuki. The only members we have confirmed at present are Uchiha Itachi and Hoshigaki Kisame."

"Anything that involves Itachi is important. Increase our efforts."

"Yes sir, though it will be difficult."

"This has an S-rank priority; you can have whatever funds you need."

"The problem is not money sir, but rather finding anyone willing to risk themselves by spying on such dangerous men."

"Well do all that you can." Yura nodded. "Now I asked you to put together a special file for me?"

"Yes sir, it's right here." He handed him a manila folder.

Sulamon opened it and took a look its contents. "Not the thickest folder I've ever seen."

"I am sorry Director, it is all the information we were able to gather on the subject."

"Tell me Yura, what is your opinion on him?"

"He seems highly intelligent and has crafted the *appearance* of disinterest. Yet he is reported to be greatly skilled in combat possessing a sharp tactical mind. I find it easy to see why he is a favorite of their Hokage. There is also one other interesting fact about him."

"Oh?"

"He is considered the best shogi player in Konoha. In fact it's reported that the only one he has ever lost to is his father." Yura smiled a bit. "Perhaps you should play a game with him?"

Sulamon nodded ruefully. "Now *that* would be interesting. Unfortunately, I think it better that he and I never meet." He looked up from the file. "You have done well as always Yura, you may go now." The captain nodded and left the office.

Sulamon went back to the file on one Nara Shikamaru.

There was a knock on the door. Chouji opened it and found Ino standing there with a tray of cookies. "Room service." She laughed.

He gave her a weak smile. "Hey Ino."

Seeing the reaction her good mood began to dissipate. "Can I come in?"

He nodded and stepped aside. "Sure."

She set the tray down on the small table in front of the sofa.
"Chocolate chip, your favorite, I had room service make them."

"Thanks Ino, that was nice of you."

A depressing silence fell between them. What made it even more depressing for her was that this was *Chouji*. Sure Shikamaru would occasionally not want to talk, but Chouji had never been that way. They'd never had trouble talking to each other before. But yesterday she'd had the *talk* Shikamaru had bullied her into. She had watched Chouji slowly deflate in front of her as she told him they would only ever be friends.

Not able to stand the quiet anymore she impulsively went up to the boy and gave him a fierce hug. "Chouji please don't hate me!"

He looked at her in shock. "Ino I would never hate you!"

"Then are you angry with me?"

But he shook his head. "No, I guess... I don't know, maybe I'm just sad to know there will never be anything between us."

Now it was her turn to look shocked. "How can you say that? Chouji you and Shikamaru are my dearest friends! You're both special to me and I care more about you two than anyone except my parents."

He hesitated, but finally decided that if he was ever going to say this now would be the time. "But not special enough to go on one *real* date with."

Her eyes dropped to the floor. "Chouji, I've never told you that I felt that way. I'm sorry but I don't think of you like that." She brought her eyes back up. "I know you want me to feel that way but I don't. It's not something I choose, it's just what's there. The heart wants what the heart wants. Can't you understand that?"

And that was the first time she saw it. It was the very first time she saw what had always been there. She saw his eyes flash with pain, with an ache so deep and terrible she wondered how she could have ever been so blind. "Yeah Ino," he said softly. "I *know* about the heart wanting what it wants." He took a breath. "Tell me just one thing though. You said you liked the way I looked when all the weight was gone. If I looked that way all the time would you want to date me then?"

She looked embarrassed. *Am I really so shallow and into looks?* "I don't know. If I were suddenly fat would you want to date me?"

"Yes."

She knew he meant it. "I'm really sorry Chouji, you are a wonderful guy and I know you would treat me well and be good to me. But I don't feel it." She felt on the verge of tears. "I should go."

As she got to the door though he spoke. "Are you really going to leave me to eat all these cookies by myself?"

She was surprised to see the old smile there. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Ino, I won't say I'm not sorry you don't feel more. I won't say I'm not hurt." He rushed on when he saw the look on her face. "But I still care about you and I still want us to be close. If all we can be is good friends then I still want that."

She smiled at him. And even though he knew it was stupid, he was glad that he had made her smile. "Thanks Chouji."

They both sat down and began eating cookies. Chouji looked at the girl and decided he would make a huge sacrifice for her. "So, are you thinking of getting any new shoes?"

She lit up. "Oh! I am so glad you asked..."

Very soon the discomfort and silence that had hung between them was, if not forgotten, set aside as they relaxed and ate cookies.

Sulamon stared at the file on his desk. "My, my, Shikamaru but you are an interesting fellow." He took a pen and scribbled one word at the end of the document.

Spy.

A friendly little chat

"Hello Temari." He called to her as she neared her front gate.

She was not happy to see him. "Hello Sulamon," she said politely. "What brings you here so early?" She'd had a good day yesterday showing Shikamaru the sights. She'd gotten in some early morning training with Baki and was eager to shower and change before he came over for lunch.

He gave her a polite smile. "Actually I was hoping you and I might have a friendly little chat."

She frowned. "This isn't about your grandson is it? I told Gaara to make it clear I want nothing more to do with him."

"You may rest assured that message was most plainly delivered."

Now she really frowned at him. "If it's not about him I can guess what it is about. You want to talk about Shikamaru don't you?" He nodded. "I'm very sorry but I really don't have time to talk this morning. Maybe we could schedule a meeting another day?"

He nodded politely. "As you wish Temari." He turned to leave. "I had hoped to discuss this matter in private, but I suppose it will just have to be discussed in the Council."

"What matter, and what does the Council have to do with this?"

"Come and walk with me Temari." He did not bother to turn around or look back at her.

She swallowed a sharp reply. She didn't appreciate being told to chase after him. But whether she liked it or not she did just that. "What is this about?" The two of them walked leisurely down the street from her home.

"Did you know that your little romance has become the talk of the town? Tongues will wag, and people love to track what the nobles are doing. People have noticed that you show this young Leaf a great deal of attention."

His tone was one he might have used with misbehaving child. Temari didn't appreciate it. "What I do in my private life is my business."

"For a private life yours seems rather public."

She sent him a sharp look. "We have had dinner together, walked together, and danced. That is **all** we have done in public."

He looked at her keenly. "Am I to take that to mean you have done far more in private?"

She blushed and looked at him in open anger. "That is none of your damn business!"

"Ah, but you see there is where we disagree. As Director of Internal Security anything that threatens Suna's peace and stability *is* my concern."

"Just how does a sixteen year old girl's social life endanger the security of a whole village?"

He shook his head. "Don't play dumb, it doesn't suit you child."

She came to a halt. "I am not a child!"

He stopped as well and frowned at her. "Then do not behave like one. You have grown up surrounded by politics and have been taught our laws and customs. You cannot pretend ignorance of what it means for you to be seen as too close to a foreign ninja."

"Who I see is my business." She crossed her arms and looked defiant.

"If you were a baker's daughter I would agree. If you were the daughter of a leatherworker you would be free to marry him without complaint. For that matter if *he* were not ninja there would be no issue. If he were a wealthy merchant or even a lord of the land of fire, your activity would raise no special comment. But he is *ninja* and of a ninja clan."

"So?" she asked contemptuously.

He shook his head, not pleased with her attitude. "Very well, if you wish to I will spell it out. If you were to marry a foreign lord you would form a *personal* tie between Sabaku and your husband's family. But when one ninja marries another it forms a *blood* tie. Were you to marry him then Sabaku would form a *blood alliance* with the Nara clan of Konoha. Their enemies would become your enemies and you would be honor bound to shelter them. Now how exactly would that look to the people of Suna? How are they to trust the oldest and most noble House when they have an allegiance to a foreign clan?"

Her face turned red. "How are they to *trust* us? My great grandfather was one of the founders of this village! We have been protecting Suna ever since there was a Suna! We would never turn our backs on our village!"

"Perhaps, but were you to eventually marry Shikamaru and join his clan there would be doubt, and that would be enough. Quite often the perception of a situation is more important than the situation's reality." He paused. "So far you have spoken only of your intentions. Have you considered his?"

"What does that mean?" She said darkly.

"Has it ever once occurred to you that he might be a spy? He is a ninja, almost by definition a spy. Has it even once crossed your mind that his intentions might not be what they seem to be? Have you thought to look underneath the underneath?"

"Shikamaru a spy?" She laughed. "I suppose he's on a mission to seduce me then?"

"If he is then I would have to say he is making steady progress." He saw about to scream at him and he held up a hand. "Seduction is about more than sex. It is about winning over someone's heart and gaining trust. Certainly by *that* definition you cannot deny his activity is suspicious."

"You don't know *anything* about what there is between us. He isn't a spy and he's not trying to trying to fool me or use me."

"Really, how do you know that?"

"I just do."

"Well that clears up my concerns."

She wasn't used to such biting sarcasm from anyone. "You wouldn't understand!"

"Well then, seeing as I am just a foolish old man, why don't you try and explain it to me?"

"He cares for me, really cares for me, and I care for him. What we feel is real, it's not any sort of trick." She saw a momentary look of open contempt and it infuriated her.

"You are a sixteen year old girl, kunoichi or not, noble or not, and you may not know as much as you think. I will tell you something about us men, we have been known to *lie* to get what we want. In that respect at least men and women are the same."

"Well let me tell you something, I trust him a hell of a lot more than I ever have you."

"You do not need to trust me to recognize that all I have told you is simple fact." His eyes focused on her. "I notice that you have not told me that you have no intention of ever marrying him."

"That is none of your business." She said coldly.

"But I think it is. You know Temari, as hard as this may be for you to believe I was young once as well. I can remember what it was like, when the blood is hot. What a thrill it is to simply follow your heart. But there comes a time when the mind must overrule the heart. You are the first daughter of House Sabaku you have a duty..."

"Don't you lecture me about duty! Oh, I know about my duty to Suna! I've been told about it since I was old enough to walk. Let me tell you about duty! My mother was murdered in service to Suna. My brother was implanted with a monster and was then shunned by everyone and forced to endure attempts on his life. I would go to sleep every night and listen to Gaara walking up and down the halls like some lost soul. I would lay awake in my bed terrified that my door would open and he would walk in and kill me. But it was my duty to watch out for him, just as it was his to be a living weapon. I almost died, my whole family almost died fighting in Konoha because it was our duty. So don't you dare stand there and give me a speech about duty." She snapped her mouth shut and took a deep breath. "Gaara has told me I can choose who I marry and he and Kankuro have given their blessing to Shikamaru's courtship. So far as I am concerned the only people who have a say about any of this are him and me. I have sacrificed much for Suna, and I will continue to do so. But I have decided that I will not let the village dictate who I will marry. That at least I claim for myself."

He stared at her for a moment. "That is your final word on the matter?"

"No, my final words are, 'leave us the hell alone.'"

He nodded. "I see, thank you for talking with me." He began walking in the direction they had come. "Good day Temari."

When Shikamaru arrived at the gate he was surprised to see Temari outside waiting for him. She greeted him with a fierce hug.

"Hey Temari, good to see you too." He hugged her back. "Is anything wrong?"

She released him and gave him a smile that looked just a little weary. "No, not a thing. Listen I was thinking of us going out again today, but would you mind if we just spent it here instead?"

He smirked. "Do I get to spend the whole day with you?"

She grinned and nodded. "Of course you do silly boy."

"In that case I don't mind at all. Is there any particular reason for the sudden change?"

"I just decided I'd rather not deal with any stupid people today."

It was late in the afternoon. They were resting in one of the dozen spare bedrooms the mansion boasted. They were sprawled out on a sofa. There was a large comfortable bed right in front of them, but she didn't like the idea of anyone spotting them lying on a bed together. She was stretched out on top of him. Her head was resting on his chest. His arms were wrapped around her. She could hear his heart beating. It sounded so comforting to her, she wanted to close her eyes and just fall asleep. How could he do that to her? She had never really ever felt safe, not completely. Fear drove her, fear pushed her, it was her constant companion. But when he held her she didn't feel afraid. When his arms were holding her tight she knew nothing bad could touch her. She had only foggy memories of her mother, but she thought that when her mother had held her it had felt like this. She felt loved and protected.

"Do you want to know something Shikamaru?" She asked in a sleepy voice.

"What?"

"You make me happy."

He stared at her. "You make me happy too Temari." He squeezed just a little tighter.

"If I fall asleep will you be here when I wake up?"

"Yes."

She looked at him with trusting eyes. "Do you promise?"

He nodded. "I promise."

She shut her eyes and placed her head back down on his chest. "Good."

He watched as she slept. For once he had no desire to sleep himself. What he wanted was just to watch her and know that she was safe.

Tanya was in room twelve. She waited patiently for the sealing jutsu to be completed and for Sulamon-sama to address her.

"I have decided that the contingency I spoke of earlier is now to be set in motion. I will require the services I outlined at our previous meeting."

She licked her lips. She always marveled at the way he could talk about murder in so clean and bloodless a fashion. *It is the only way to save my brother.* "I understand Sulamon-sama. I know of your reputation, and that you would never break your word. Will you give me your word that if I do as you ask you will have my brother exchanged?"

"I give you my solemn word on the honor of my clan that your brother will be exchanged; on two conditions. That you do precisely as you are instructed and that you reveal it to no one."

"Even if the ah... contingency does not work?"

He frowned but nodded. "If you fulfill your part, then yes, even if the operation suffers failure I will honor my pledge."

She took a deep breath. "Then I shall do what you require of me."

An A rank mission

There was the House. The gate guards nodded and passed him through without a word. Senya nodded and walked slowly towards the front door. He had been thinking about this moment for the past three days. He was tired; running at high speeds through the deep desert was not fun. It was a wearying and boring experience that went on mile after mile and hour after hour. It was no accident that the patrols were normally assigned to Genin teams. They provided excellent survival and endurance training; but they could exhaust even Jonins in their prime. He imagined for a moment someone not born here trying to stand the pace. He pictured a certain pony tailed boy gasping and dying of thirst under a red sun. He let himself have a chuckle at the thought. There wasn't a whole lot else to be happy about.

For three days Tybal-sensei had gone on and on about what it would be like to have a wife. To listen to him tell it he would be spending most of his nights at home helping to clean or listening to her talk. How thrilling. His description of fatherhood, especially changing diapers, had frightened him worse than any A-rank was ever liable to. And Tybal had kept reminding him he would have to be more responsible now. Apparently most wives didn't like their husbands to be out all night drinking and fighting. When he'd tried to tell sensei he was sure Celia would let him do whatever he wanted he'd gotten a response. Tybal had laughed, and laughed, and laughed, and then he had laughed some more. When his bastard of a sensei had finally been able to talk again he'd said that wives and girlfriends were two entirely different creatures. He'd assured him that once she was his wife her attitudes and expectations would change.

But all of that was for the future. Right now, he had something else on his mind. He would have really liked to have stopped for just *one* cold drink before returning home. But he didn't dare. His grandfather had warned him specifically about that, and grandfather was not someone to challenge. He shuddered just at the thought. He'd been

thinking about his punishment. He was sure that he would not be disowned so he figured he would survive whatever it was. He had decided that the worst thing that could happen was simply to be told he was not permitted to leave the House except for missions and not allowed any alcohol. In short, to be grounded. That had happened before. For an eighteen year old Jonin it would be utterly humiliating, but there would be no getting around the punishment. Whatever his grandfather decided he would be a good boy and nod, there was no arguing his grandfather out of anything once his mind was made up.

As soon as he entered the house a servant informed him his grandfather was in his office and expecting him. Well at least he was done with the waiting. He knocked on the office door and was told to enter. Sulamon was sitting there behind his desk. He shut the door behind him and bowed. "Greetings Sulamon-sama."

"You may refer to me as grandfather." He pointed to one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Have a seat."

"Thank you grandfather." This was turning out to be much better than he'd hoped.

"How was the patrol?"

"Long, hot, boring; just like every patrol."

He nodded absently. "I have been giving much thought on what to do with you Senya." He sent the young man a hint of smile. "I am sure you know that I have found you to be a huge disappointment to me?"

Embarrassed he nodded. "Yes, grandfather." Maybe this wasn't going to be so good after all.

"The Council has recently decided that we will attempt to imitate the teaching methods of Konoha. Seeing the results the Leaf nins enjoy we believe we might have something to learn."

Senya shrugged. "It sounds interesting."

"I am glad you think so, I have decided to nominate you as a new instructor. You will be teaching eight year olds the basics of being a ninja."

Senya gaped at him. The old man had lulled him into a false sense of security and sand bagged him. A *teacher* ? "Pardon me grandfather but just how long would this *assignment* be for?"

"It will be for the duration of the experiment, a minimum of two years. If we are pleased by the results it may become permanent."

Two years? Maybe permanent? Oh hell no! "Uhhh, pardon me grandfather but don't you feel that would be a waste of someone with my level of combat skills?"

"Normally, however Senya you have proven you cannot be trusted to behave like a civilized adult. Perhaps remaining close to home will aid in improving your behavior."

Senya blanched, in his most depressed moments he had never imagined his punishment would be this severe. No real missions? Staying close to home? "I see." Yet there would be no arguing with his grandfather. He would be a good boy.

Sulamon was pleased to see his grandson's spirit a bit crushed. He had taken and now he would give. "However..." His grandson's eyes lit up. "There might be an alternative. Tell me grandson, how would you like to completely change my opinion of you? How would you like to have all past sins forgotten and forgiven?"

"I would like that very much grandfather. What would I have to do?"

"I have a very *delicate* mission. Normally you would not be someone I would consider for something like this. But I believe you are motivated, yes?"

"Yes, grandfather!"

He nodded. "It is classified an A-rank and it will be a solo mission. It is top secret and you are forbidden to discuss it with anyone. There will be no documentation and at its completion you will not file a mission report." He looked at him sternly. "Do you understand?"

"I understand very clearly grandfather." This was going to be what they called a, 'hands,' mission. Meaning if anything went wrong everyone would wash their hands of it. These kinds of missions were always of one of two varieties. They always involved either assassination or espionage. "What is the mission grandfather?"

"An assassination of an enemy agent currently here in Suna. The agent has not been caught in any illegal activity and so cannot be arrested. The agent has strong connections to the leadership to a foreign village. As such this assassination *must* take place in secrecy. Let me stress this point to you; *no one must know how he dies*. If there is any danger of secrecy being broken you must abort the mission. Am I clear on that?"

"Yes grandfather."

"I am not happy to order this; his death will be a serious incident. However so long as it is not *certain* he was attacked by a Suna nin it should not lead to a complete break in relations. As such you will be forbidden to wear either your hitai-ite or Jonin vest. You will also have to disguise your identity. I cannot stress this enough, *no one* must know he was killed by a Suna ninja. And I repeat that if this cannot be done in absolute secrecy you are to abort the mission."

"I understand grandfather. Who is the target?"

Sulamon handed him a folder that had been sitting on his desk.
"Nara Shikamaru."

On hearing that Senya gave his grandfather a wide and very happy smile.

They were kissing by the gates. Their arms were wrapped around each other, neither wanting to let go.

"I got a call from the head merchant today."

"And?"

He let out a disappointed sigh. "He wanted to let me know he'd completed his purchases of goods and supplies and that the caravan will be leaving the day after tomorrow at 9 a.m."

"I can't believe the week's up tomorrow. It feels like you just got here!"

"I know, I feel the same." He caressed her cheek and looked into her warm eyes. "We still have one more day together and we can have breakfast before I leave."

She nodded and squeezed him tighter. "I don't want you to go."

"I don't want to go either."

She gave him a mischievous little smile. "You know if some of the wagons were to have their axles *accidentally* break..."

"Temari..." His voice was scolding, but his face was amused.

"Just kidding... mostly."

"What do you want to do tomorrow?"

"Why don't we have lunch in the garden again?" He nodded eagerly. "Then you can take me out dancing for our last night together."

He frowned a bit. "More dancing?"

She frowned as well. "Don't you *like* dancing with me?"

He gave her his little trademark smirk. "I like doing everything with you Temari, so dancing it is."

They shared one more long slow kiss and he finally pulled himself away.

Senya flipped through the file. He spotted something interesting. "Shadow jutsus huh?"

Sulamon nodded. "They are the blood line limit of the Nara clan. They are mostly used for possession, but have other uses as well."

"Doesn't sound impressive." He closed the folder and handed it back.

"Perhaps you should take a bit more time going over that. I will not allow it to leave my study. But I will allow you as much time as you like to review it."

Senya shook his head. "He's a weakling. I doubt he'll last two minutes."

Sulamon looked at his grandson and seriously considered calling the whole thing off. "Confidence is a blessing, but arrogance a curse. I've told you before to always try and gather information before attacking an enemy. Perhaps you should reconsider and read that some more."

But Senya stubbornly shook his head. "I know enough about him."

"I wonder grandson, is that confidence I hear or arrogance."

He smiled. "I suppose it depends on how I do on my mission."

Sulamon wanted to chastise him again, but it seemed pointless. "Get some sleep; you will have a very long day tomorrow."

His last full day in Suna was bright and hot like all the others had been. He would miss Temari, but not the heat, and not the cloudless skies. He had breakfast with his team and they made plans for getting together the following morning. When he mentioned he would probably have breakfast with Temari, Ino had made another comment. Shikamaru let it go as he usually did. He was glad to see Chouji back to his usual self. He really hoped when they got home Chouji would be able to find a girl that would appreciate him. He made a mental note to talk to his aunt Suska to see if she knew someone. It would be troublesome, but he wanted to help his friend out. Being with Temari had convinced him that though girls were troublesome, the right girl was worth the trouble. He hung out with his friends until it was time to go to the mansion.

Senya watched his target walking obliviously along the street. The Leaf nin seemed happy with the world, lucky him. Senya knew where he was headed of course. It still amazed and galled him that Temari had invited this foreigner into her home but had never even accepted a single one of his invitations. His grandfather was obviously right; this character had to be a master manipulator to have managed that. Senya felt the urge to leap down from the roof tops and just do it. Just tear into the little wimp and spread his blood all over the street. But it was morning and there were people everywhere. *Have to be patient, I have all day.*

Temari greeted him at the door with a hug and a quick kiss. "Hey Temari there's something I'm curious about."

"What?"

"Why are there no guards at the gate? And why is it always open?"

She gave him a small smile. "Everyone in Suna knows who lives here. Would you try and break into a place where *Gaara* lives?"

"I see your point."

She took a hold of his hand. "Let's go upstairs, we can play a game."

"Good, I haven't played shogi in a couple of days."

She gave him a mischievous grin. "We're not playing shogi; I have a better game in mind."

"There is no better game than shogi."

She leaned in and whispered teasingly into his ear. "Ever hear of a game called, 'five minutes in heaven?'" By the way his face suddenly turned red she knew that he had.

"What do you think he's doing right now?" Ino asked.

"He's probably just hanging out with Temari." Chouji took another bite of cake. They were at a table in an outdoor café.

"That slut probably has her hands all over him."

"Why are you so down on Temari? She makes Shika happier than I've ever seen."

"Oh come on Chouji! It's obvious she's all wrong for him. I mean even if she lived in Konoha it would still never work out. I mean she's nothing but a pushy loud mouth blonde who tries to tell everyone what to do! Honestly, what kind of guy would be attracted to that?" She looked at her friend. He was just staring at her. "What?"

"Nothing."

Tanya's heart was pounding within her chest. She took a look around to make sure no one was in the hall. She quickly opened the door to a small room on the first floor. Inside was a large piece of machinery. The many lights showed it was obviously running. She reached over to a dial and gave it a simple twist. Then she stepped back out

again. She looked about, but there was no one. Despite her fear she walked upstairs calmly. She passed a couple of the other servants and said hi. She was very glad Gaara was out of the house. She went over to a large window that was always left uncovered. As casually as she could she moved the curtains blocking out the light. *It's done.* She went back downstairs to do some cleaning. She tried to relax. She didn't notice the slight trembling of her fingers. *I haven't killed anyone; I just did what I had to.*

Outside Senya noticed the closing of the curtain and knew what it meant. That was good, it might be useful later.

They were lying side by side in the grass, the remains of their lunch already packed away. "When do you think you'll be able to visit me in Konoha?"

She looked over to him. "I honestly have no idea, but certainly not before the Chunin exams."

"Well those aren't too far away. I really want you to come see me; I'm going to miss you."

She smiled and propped herself up on one elbow. "What will you miss most about me?"

He smirked at her. "The look in you eyes, that smile on your lips, the sound of your sighs, and the shake of your hips."

She laughed and brought her hands together in applause. "Oh, we've discovered a new talent."

"Don't get used to it. So what will you miss about me?"

"Nothing! You annoy the hell out of me."

He sent her a deeply hurt look. "So you won't miss me at all?"

She brought two fingers together and held them just barely apart.
"Maybe just a little."

"You know I liked that game you showed me."

"I thought you might."

"Do you have to be in a closet to play it?"

In reply she flipped herself on top of him, pressing him down into the soft grass. "No, you don't."

Senya chewed absently on the ration bar. The sun was getting lower. The bastard had been hiding out in the Sabaku house all day. Boring, boring, boring, just sitting on a roof looking down the block. A weak genjutsu hid him from prying eyes as he just sat there in the hot sun. *Come on out and play Shikamaru, come on out and play.*

"Where are we going?"

"Come on, I want us to watch the sunset together."

"Troublesome woman couldn't we just do that here?"

"There's a special place with an amazing view. Then after that we'll get dinner and you can take me dancing all night."

"You know I have to get *some* sleep tonight."

She poked him in the ribs. "Suck it up tough guy."

"Troublesome."

Finally! The two of them were going out. He stretched a bit and got ready to follow them.

They were sitting on an obelisk that stretched about two thousand feet into the air. Except

for the Tower of Winds it was the tallest structure in Suna. Below them was a vast maze of pyramids, walkways, arches, domes and smaller obelisks. The place was on the western edge of Suna just within the wall, and about a mile from any other buildings. It seemed as isolated a spot as you could find in the city proper.

"So what is this place?"

"It's a monument to all of Suna's fallen heroes. We call it the, 'city of the honored dead,' or just the city of the honored." She pointed to the pyramids beneath them. They were each of an identical height rising about a hundred feet; big but not gigantic. "Each of those is the final resting place of a hero of Suna."

He stared at her. "You brought me to a *cemetery* on our last night together?"

"It's a monument, and take a look." She swept her arm out towards the western horizon. "Tell me they have sunsets like *that* in Konoha."

He nodded. He had to admit the sunsets were spectacular in the desert. The sun was more than half way down and the entire sky was a brilliant shade of crimson and gold. "The sunsets are beautiful here but I miss the clouds."

"You're never happy are you?"

But he shook his head and took hold of her hand. "No, right now I am very happy."

She smiled and they just sat there for a moment. The obelisk was smooth stone. There was no balcony or steps. But being ninja they simply used chakra to stick to the stone face. "What are your dreams?" She asked him quietly.

"Well I wanted to be an average ninja making an average living. Marry a regular girl who was not super pretty or super ugly. Have two kids a girl and then a boy. Retire when my daughter got married and my son became a ninja, and then just spend the rest of my days playing shogi or go. And eventually die of old age before my wife."

She shook her head laughing. "I don't believe it; even your *dreams* are lazy."

"Well what is your dream?"

She paused. "It's silly."

"Tell me anyway."

She hesitated but finally told him. "I grew up without my mom, with a dad who barely acknowledged me, a brother who was self centered, and a brother who killed people just for annoying him. I would make the servants read me stories every night. Always romantic stories about a prince who would come to rescue his fair maiden. I always dreamed that some day my prince would come for me. He would tell me that he loved me and only me and that he would be with me forever. Then we would go to a small house somewhere and have a family and just live there, happy, loved, and safe." She shook her head feeling a bit embarrassed. "I told you it was silly."

"No," he said. "I like your dream Temari."

She looked into his eyes and she felt happy, loved, and safe. "Shikamaru..." he kissed her, and she didn't need to say anything more.

Standing beneath one of the stone arches he watched them kiss. He felt a hate and a jealousy some burst out like fire. He had been planning to wait until night fall to make his move. But this was good enough. There was no one else here, just the three of them. The nearest people were a mile away. Once Temari left there would be

no witnesses. He took a radio communicator out of a belt pouch. He was done waiting.

A loud and irritating beep interrupted their kiss. With a worried look she pulled the radio communicator out of her pouch. The radio wasn't used for casual communication, it was for emergencies only. She put in the ear piece and spoke. "This is Temari what is... Gaara is that... repeat that you're garbled... your voice sounds... what emergency... what? All right I'll bring... what, you want... but why? Your signal's fading... Gaara... can you hear me? Gaara?" She was standing. Shikamaru had a concerned look on his face and was on his feet as well.

"What's wrong?"

"Gaara contacted me on the emergency line, but there was heavy static, his voice sounded strange. He wants me to come back immediately to the house, but he asked that you stay here until I can come back." She switched her radio setting to send. She waited a minute and checked the frequency. "Damn it, I'm not getting anything, it's like the com link is off line." She looked at him worried. "Gaara wouldn't call me if it weren't urgent and I don't like the fact that the line is just dead air when I call back. I'm sorry but I need to check this out."

He nodded his agreement. "Of course you do. I'll wait here for you."

She didn't like this, something felt very bad. Gaara was *never* panicked. "Wait one hour for me. If I'm not back by then go to the hotel and call me from there."

"Roger."

She gave him a kiss. "I *will* see you later." With that she jumped off and began heading back to her home.

He watched her go. He wondered just what was going on. He jumped down himself. He found a good sized dome and got to the east side of it so he could get some shade. He was only there a couple minutes when he was surprised to see Temari jump down beside him. She couldn't have made it all the way home so quickly, she must have gotten another message.

"Temari, what was the emergency?"

"Someone has died!"

He ran over to her. "Who?"

A predatory smile covered her face and he felt a sharp pain. He looked down to see that she had just stabbed him through the belly with her kunai.

"You."

A fight to the death

Author's Note: Once again I want to thank everyone who has taken the time to review. I am happy to say that this story has received over 10,000 hits and 99 reviews. I also want to thank those of you who have put this on your Favorite or Story Alert list. It's very satisfying to know that so many of you enjoy my work. After this chapter there will only be two more, including an epilogue. I do however have thoughts about two possible sequels, so be sure to let me know what all of you think about that. As for this chapter, I think the chapter title pretty much says it all. Enjoy.

Along with the sharp horrible pain came a total shock. She was stabbing him! He didn't think he let his instincts take over. Balling his fist he swung with all his strength and was rewarded with a satisfying crunch as his fist connected solidly with her chin. He sent her reeling back and was rewarded with even more pain as the kunai sliced out of him. He yelled out as he leapt back to put some distance between them. His left hand he put over his gaping wound, with his right he reached into his weapons pouch. He pulled out three shuriken and threw them at her. She hit the ground and rolled back up to her feet. She leapt up easily avoiding the shuriken and landing on top of the dome they had been standing behind. Shikamaru landed on a walkway that connected two pyramids. The pain was bad and blood was covering his hand. This was not a good way to start a fight, especially not a fight to the death.

She laughed and pulled out three kunai in each hand. "Is that the best you can do Leaf nin? Can't you even make a fight of it?" She threw all six kunai in a flash aiming to kill and end this.

He ducked down and rolled towards one of the pyramids. "Who are you? You're not Temari." Though it hurt he pulled his left hand away from the wound and began making hand signs.

"You sure about that?" She laughed.

"Yeah." He completed the seals. " **Shadow Possession Technique.**
" His shadow raced forward in an effort to capture her.

She saw it and had no trouble leaping away ahead of it. "Too slow!" While in the air she snapped out a couple more kunai. He leapt around the corner of the pyramid temporarily putting it between him and her. "Are you just going to run rabbit?"

He pulled out some gauze from one of the pouches of his vest and very swiftly covered his gash. "That seems like a good idea for right now." He wasn't going to panic. A stomach wound might hurt like hell, but it wasn't immediately fatal. "Why don't you tell me who you are and why you're attacking me?"

She landed about halfway up the opposite side of the pyramid. She began moving for the peak. "Well maybe I really am Temari and we're having a lover's spat."

He finished bandaging his wound. It was a good thing he *always* carried all of his equipment with him, even on a date. "You are not Temari." He began climbing up the pyramid hoping to surprise his opponent. "She would never stab me. She might beat me to death with her fan, but she wouldn't stab me."

He was only about half way up when she stepped out onto the capstone. She was smiling down at him. "You know what, you're right." The henge dropped with a puff of smoke. "I'm not Temari." In her place was a man in desert camouflage pants and a large tan jacket. He wore the customary turban and his face was covered by a veil except for the eyes. Across his jacket were criss crossed two belts laced with kunai. And on each hip he wore a massive pouch. With no effort he tossed a few more kunai. Shikamaru leapt back off the pyramid and down to the ground.

Perfect, my jutsu works best when I'm above my opponent. He reached a hand into each pouch and pulled out about a dozen terra

cotta ceramic tiles. He tossed them into the air and quickly performed the necessary hand signs. " **Dancing Tiles Technique.**" The tiles immediately began spinning and orbiting around him. He reached into the pouches again and tossed out more and more of them until he had close to a hundred of them spinning around him. They were like living things, eager to guard and serve him.

Shikamaru was on the ground, looking up at his opponent about a hundred feet above him. He had a bad feeling about this. "Just who the hell are you?"

He laughed and brought his hands together. "I'm the hawk circling above its prey. Now, **run rabbit!!**" With the jutsu active he didn't say any more words or hand signs. With his will he sent all the tiles soaring down on their prey.

Shikamaru moved as fast as he could but there were just too many of them to dodge. He got his arms up to protect his neck and face. Spinning as fast as they were their edges cut into him like kunai. His arms, legs, and back were all hit and he cried out in pain. Not only did they cut him but they hit like hammers. His leap was knocked off course and he landed about ten feet in front of an obelisk.

This is too damn easy. I cannot wait to tell grandfather how I butchered this stupid Leaf nin. He reached into his pouches and began tossing out tiles again. He watched Shikamaru stumble around to the other side of the obelisk. He laughed, if the poor Leaf nin thought *that* was going to save him he was in for a surprise. They had barely started fighting and poor little Shikamaru was already bleeding and hurt. He was having fun. He wanted to make the game last just a little longer.

Shikamaru took the gauze out again. None of the cuts were too deep, but he had a lot of them. *I am starting to lose a lot of blood.* He did what he could as fast as he could. He covered the biggest cuts on his arms and legs. There was a sharp pain in the middle of his back but there was no way for him to reach around to fix it. This was not going well. This was just like his fight with Temari during the

Chunin exams. He was up against an opponent with greater raw power who could strike at him from beyond the range of his shadow jutsus. But even though he had lost that match he had found a way to capture her. He had maneuvered her into a vulnerable position where he could reach her. He had to find a way to do the same with this guy or he was going to die here.

"Hey, Leaf nin, how are you feeling?"

"I've been better."

"Listen, I would love to tell you who I am, but I'm afraid that would be against the rules. I've decided to be a good little boy for this mission. But I could tell you why I'm about to kill you. Still want to know?"

"I'm going out on a limb and guessing it has something to do with Temari."

"Good guess."

"I'm also guessing you're one of her many admirers."

"I'm **more** than an admirer, I happen to be one of her suitors."

"Well that's a lie isn't it *Senya*, you *were* one of her suitors right? Didn't she let you know she wanted nothing more to do with you?"

There was a long silence and then a strained laugh. "Very good Shikamaru, how did you know?"

"I didn't, it was an educated guess, but now I know."

"Well since I'm about to kill you I don't suppose it really matters."

Shikamaru finished tying the last of his explosive notes to his kunai. "Say, since I know you'll never get the chance to find out for yourself, would you like to know what it's like to kiss her?"

Senya could feel a white hot anger filling him again. All of a sudden this wasn't fun anymore. And the worst part of it was the bastard had a point. "Sure, tell me."

"She always tasted like fresh cherries and kissing her was like getting to visit heaven." He cast his jutsu.

"Heaven, huh? Well I don't think you'll be getting any more visits there." No, this was no longer fun. "Time for you to die Leaf nin." He watched Shikamaru make a run for it. He sent half of his tiles flying down to rip him apart. Several of the tiles struck and he watched as the bushin disappeared in a puff of smoke.

It was time to move. The moment the bushin was destroyed Shikamaru leapt out from behind the obelisk and tossed all six of the kunai with explosive notes. Senya jumped down the other side of the pyramid as he sent the remaining tiles to intercept the kunai. The knives hit the tiles and they all went off in a massive explosion. Senya avoided the worst of it, but was still thrown down the side of the pyramid hard. He got up quick, there was a taste of blood in his mouth and a couple of ribs hurt, but otherwise he seemed all right. He looked around and was surprised to see Shikamaru standing in the smoke at the top of the pyramid.

" **Shadow Possession Technique.** " He would try to get him while he was disoriented from the blast. His shadow stretched out and towards Senya.

Senya saw the shadow coming for him. *Not good!* He leapt back. The shadow came on after him. He leapt back again, onto the top of an arch. The shadow continued to move, then slowed, then stopped well short of him. *So it can only go about fifty yards.* He began tossing out some more tiles, but this time he put some of his chakra into about half a dozen of them. "Good try, you managed to hurt me and you damn near caught me with your shadow."

Shikamaru was huffing with the exertion. His shadow was receding, if he could have moved just a *little* faster it might have worked. "Yes,

almost, but not quite."

"Let me show you how it's done." He sent out the three dozen or so tiles after the Leaf nin." As he'd hoped Shikamaru jumped down the other side of the pyramid, obviously thinking it would shield him. It would, from the ones he had not charged. When they passed the top of the pyramid he detonated the six tiles with near the same force as explosive notes. Again the top of the pyramid disappeared in a huge explosion.

The explosion caught him totally by surprise and he was thrown down the side of the pyramid by the force of it. When he slammed into the ground he felt bones break. He was sure some of his ribs were broken, along with his left shoulder. He could still move his left hand and arm, but it hurt like hell.

Having learned his lesson, Senya ran around the pyramid to an obelisk about a hundred yards from where Shikamaru was now lying crumpled on the ground. No more playing around. He reached into his jacket and took out one of the dozen summoning scrolls he'd brought with him. Activating it he immediately summoned a hundred tiles. "Time to die Leaf nin, have fun roasting in hell." With his will he sent every last tile down towards the boy.

Shikamaru sized up the situation instantly. He was too badly hurt to move very fast and there were too many tiles. But there was one thing to his advantage. Lying where he was he was completely in the pyramid's shadow. He had one chance to escape being hit by those tiles. He put his hands together and ran through fifteen hand signs. "**Walk in Shadow Technique.**"

As he watched Senya saw the Leaf nin cast a jutsu and suddenly lose his form and color. For an instant he seemed to be made of shadows. The tiles struck and passed through him hitting the ground and wall. Then Shikamaru was gone completely.

"Oh hell no!" Senya cried out.

Temari didn't slow down until she was through the front door. The moment she did she began yelling for Gaara. The surprised servants told her he was in the study. She went into the study without bothering to knock. Gaara looked up at her from his desk. He seemed surprised and just as calm and collected as he usually was.

"You didn't call me on the radio com link did you?"

He looked at her in greater surprise. "No, Temari I did not."

She nodded. "Gaara I think we have a serious problem. Please come with me, we need to check something."

Curious he agreed and the two of them went down the hall to a small room. Opening the door nothing seemed unusual. At least until Temari took a closer look at the frequency setting. "Someone changed the frequency. I received a message that I thought was from you. When I tried to call you back I got dead air." She set the setting back to its correct place.

"Have we had any visitors today?" Gaara asked.

"Only Shikamaru."

"Then presuming he is not to blame, it would seem we have a spy in our midst."

Temari nodded unhappily. "It looks that way. But why would anyone go to this trouble to just send me home? And why would they tell me to leave..." And suddenly she gasped as it became clear. "This isn't about me! They're after Shikamaru!" Without another word she hurried to the door.

"I'll come with you."

"No, find out who did this and squeeze them!" Temari fled out the door. She wasn't in the habit of giving Gaara orders, but this once she did and didn't care. She leapt out the front door running for all

she was worth. Praying and promising Kami every possible offering so long as she found him all right.

He was huffing in and out the air. His hands were shaking and he was hurting bad. He had used up a lot of chakra with that last jutsu and he didn't have much more left. But for the moment at least he was safe. He was lying in the shadow of another pyramid, this one closer to the outer wall. He made a mental note to thank his dad for bugging him into learning some more of the family jutsus. When he got home, troublesome or not, he was finally learning all of them and anything else his dad had to teach him. He also made a mental note to talk to Tsunade about issuing radio communicators to all shinobi teams as standard equipment. They were very expensive, but would be invaluable to teams in the field. For instance, if he were just able to call Ino or Chouji right now that would make a world of difference. For that matter if only there were a phone booth somewhere he could call the hotel or the Sabaku house. As it was he knew help would be coming soon. When Temari figured it out she would get back here as fast as she could. Unfortunately her home was on the other side of Suna. Even moving at top speed over the roof tops it was about ten minutes from here to there. Say it would take about five for her to figure it out and get moving back here. So a grand total of about twenty five minutes then, before Temari showed up here ready to murder Senya. He thought they were halfway through that now. So he had to hold on for, ten, twelve, maybe fifteen more minutes. He put his hands together in an, 'O,' and began to consider his options.

Senya was on top of the central obelisk looking desperately in all directions. He was starting to panic and was scared as hell. What the hell jutsu was that? Where had he gone to? If somehow he was back in the city the game was over and he was a dead man. From the moment his grandfather had given him this assignment he had only thought of one possible ending to it. Now suddenly he was focused on the other possibility. If Shikamaru got away his life, as he'd known

it, was over. No more being a nobleman, no more marrying Celia, no more being a Suna nin, hell, no more Suna. This was a hands mission. If it went bad his grandfather and everyone else would turn their backs on him and pretend he had been acting on his own. He was not deluded enough to believe for a second that his grandfather would try to save him. The first thing that would happen would be that he would be disowned by his clan. Then after that his best hope would be to be immediately executed. A much worse alternative would be to end up handed over to the Leaf nins and their tender mercy. If Shikamaru got away he wasn't going home again. If that happened he was going over the wall and becoming a missing nin. But even that alternative meant his ruin. Even if he got to keep his freedom and his life, he would lose everything else and never be able to return.

Calm the hell down! He took a couple deep breaths. What he'd used was obviously some sort of teleportation jutsu; and those had very limited ranges. There was no chance he could have used it to get into the city. And if he had, well it was game over anyway. He had to assume he was still hiding somewhere in the monument. *He's on his last legs, if I find him no more playing around. I'll just kill him and get the hell out of here.* He was painfully aware that he did not have an unlimited amount of time. He leapt down from the obelisk and began running about the monument searching for the rabbit.

Whenever he got into a serious fight it always felt as though he were playing a huge game of shogi; with himself and his opponent as the only pieces on the board. He'd gotten the worst of it so far, but that didn't matter. As he'd told Temari, again and again, it didn't matter how many pieces you lost, only who had the last winning move. He looked westward at the sun. It was very nearly gone now. He had about five minutes of daylight left. For a shadow user this was both the best and worst time to use jutsus. It was the best because the shadows were longer now than at any other time in the day. It was the worst because once the sun was gone the shadows would disappear with the gathering twilight.

He had two courses open to him, both with risks. One he could just hunker down and try to hide until Temari arrived. The problem there was that once the sun went down he lost his shadow jutsus and was a sitting duck if Senya spotted him. Two he could put his plan into action and try and take Senya out himself. The problem with that was it required him to make himself a target in order to move Senya into the necessary position. And if it was option two he had to go right now, he was almost out of time.

"If she saves my life twice I'll never hear the end of it." There, the decision hadn't been that hard. He began making hand signs.

Senya spotted him making a run for it heading west. He was obviously badly hurt and not moving that fast. He went after him. He had a hundred tiles spinning around him.

"Where do you think you're going rabbit?"

Shikamaru laughed but kept going as fast as he could. "I've worked up an appetite; can you recommend a good restaurant?"

"You don't need any food where you're going." He made sure to keep a safe distance, just in case, and sent a dozen tiles his way. Shikamaru tried to dodge them as best he could but was still hit. He disappeared in a puff of smoke. "Damn it!" He came to a halt and scanned the area around him. Nothing, not a damn thing. Well at least he knew Shikamaru was still here. He needed a better view. He rushed back to the central obelisk and leapt to the very top. He spotted him. He was running in the opposite direction now, straight eastward, and was almost to the edge of the monument. *Please Kami let this be the real thing.* He sent a dozen tiles racing down. This time when they hit their target it didn't vanish in a puff of smoke. He saw thrilled to hear a cry of pain and see his opponent hit the ground. "Finally!" He spoke with more relief than anything else. He still had eleven summoning scrolls on him. He was going to use every last one of them until Shikamaru was nothing but dog meat. "You're dead."

His left ankle was definitely broken. He was lying on the stone pavement looking back up. He saw Senya standing on the very top of the obelisk, no doubt getting ready to send down the rest of those damn tiles. He was nearly depleted of chakra and in terrible pain.

He smiled. "Checkmate." He cast the seals. " **Shadow Possession Technique.** "

He was about to send the rest of the tiles flying when his body froze. He instantly lost his control over the tiles and they fell the long way to earth. Suddenly he bent himself over and put his hands on his knees. His chest was moving as if he were panting for air. It was a mirror of the pose Shikamaru was in.

"You couldn't have gotten me!" He shouted down. "You're hundreds of yards away!"

Shikamaru nodded and so did Senya. "Look at your feet." He shouted back up.

Senya did, he didn't have a choice. He was standing on the eastern corner of the obelisk's point. "So?"

"You're standing in shadow." Senya didn't understand. "You should have studied my abilities. I can use other shadows to extend my range. The moment you stepped foot on the peak you were in reach."

Grandfather was right I should have studied. "So what now?" He called down mockingly. "I mean it's not like you can shadow me to death."

"Actually that's not true; I have an assassination technique called, 'Shadow Neck Bind.' But I'm afraid I don't have the chakra right now."

"You're almost completely out aren't you?" Shikamaru nodded and so did Senya. "You've got enough left to hold me for what? A minute? Two?"

"About that, yes."

"The second you let go I whistle up one of my scrolls and I kill you."

"I know, so I'm afraid I have no choice but to kill you first."

"How are you going to do that?" He shouted scornfully.

"I'm going to make you take one step forward."

"Huh?"

Shikamaru was done with explanations. He took one long step forward. On him it seemed comical. For Senya that step was out into nothing. He plunged face first off the two thousand foot height, he screamed all the way down.

Shikamaru sat down. He was feeling lightheaded. *Blood loss* . Reaching into his vest he got out two items. He lit a flare and set it next to him. In the gathering darkness it would help Temari find him. He then took the needle and removed its cap. The morphine shot would help with the pain, and now that the fight was over it wouldn't matter if it slowed down his thinking. As the morphine kicked in he laid out on the stones and looked up into the cloudless sky.

A good bye

She was never what you would call religious. Didn't really believe in it. She believed in what she could see and touch. She believed in training and in action not in prayers. But she prayed now. As she approached the monument she prayed for all she was worth. She thought she sniffed just a trace of smoke in the air. The sun was down and it was twilight. On the eastern edge of the monument she spotted a red light. As soon as she got near enough to see she gasped and felt her heart stop. Bathed in the red light was Shikamaru's body, covered by a dozen wounds and soaked in his own blood. *No! He can't be dead!*

"Shikamaru!" She leapt to his side and dropped to her knees. She reached two fingers to his throat and began searching for a pulse. There! A pulse! It was slow but steady. *He's alive!!* As if to confirm it his eyes opened.

There was Temari, why was she crying? His thoughts were foggy. He didn't feel any pain now. Morphine, great stuff, he felt like his whole body was floating. He was tired and very sleepy. "Hey Temari."

She touched his face and looked down into his eyes. "Shikamaru are you all right? What happened?"

"Senya attacked me, I killed him. Didn't need any help this time." He gave her a lazy smile.

Senya? Oh Sulamon I will kill you for this. She tried to smile back as she lifted him up into her arms. "You did great; I'm getting you to a hospital right now. You'll be fine."

He didn't feel her lifting him; it was getting kind of cold. "Temari?"

"Yes?"

"I love you. I love you so much Temari."

She stared at him. "Baka you pick *now* to tell me that?" She tried to make light of it, but her heart was torn. It was filled with worry, grief, and... joy. "I love you too Shikamaru." She was running now with him held up in her arms.

I'm glad she said it back. He was very tired. He shut his eyes and went into the comforting darkness.

She saw his eyes close. "Hey lazy stay with me! Open your eyes! Shikamaru! Shikamaru stay with me!" When he didn't respond she pushed her body even harder, willing herself to move faster. "You're going to be all right. You're going to be all right. You're going to be all right." She wasn't sure if she was saying it for him or for herself. But she kept repeating the mantra all the way to Suna Hospital.

In the master bedroom Gaara pressed a hidden button. A secret door opened revealing a small room only ten square feet. The room had a single chair, a large console, and a hundred and thirty monitors. A monitor for every room, hallway, and area both inside and outside the house. He had not known of the room's existence until he'd become the head of Sabaku and been given a letter written by the Kazekage for his successor. It had been addressed to Kankuro. The letter had revealed a number of carefully guarded secrets; this room was just one of them. The Kazekage had been consumed by fear of conspiracy and a desire for security. He'd had hidden cameras placed everywhere and used them to keep tabs on those who were, physically, closest to him. Gaara had no fears for his security and rarely used the room. On occasion he wanted to know what a visitor was up to, but he didn't concern himself with his siblings or his servants. At least until now.

He tapped some keys on the console. All the images on the monitors became the same, an image of a large radio transmitter sitting in a room. Everything that occurred was stored in memory for twenty four hours. He began rewinding the image backwards. It took a few minutes, but he finally found what he had been looking for.

Tanya was about to leave for home when she felt the sand wrapping itself around her. She screamed. The sand covered her mouth and she could only make muffled noises. A few servants came running to find out what was happening. At the sight of Gaara standing there and Tanya bound in sand they did the only sensible thing. Without a word they turned around and ran away in terror. Gaara noticed and sighed, this would hurt the image he had been trying to build. Rumors would fly through Suna that he was murdering people again. Oh well, he had things to do now. He stared at Tanya. Only her eyes and nose had been left uncovered. She was giving him a look he'd seen *many* times before. Sometimes his reputation did come in handy. "You have been very bad Tanya. I am afraid I am going to have to punish you now." From the muffled noises he knew she was trying to scream. "Lets go down to the basement and have a talk."

Temari heard a storm tear through the hospital. This particular storm had a name, Yamanaka Ino. Ino came tearing around a corner and towards the waiting area just outside operating room one. The girl looked like she was furious with the entire world. Following on her heels was a very worried looking Chouji.

The moment she saw Temari she went up to the older girl. The girl's clothes were covered in blood. Temari opened her mouth to say something but Ino just wasn't in the mood to listen. She reared back and the punched the girl as hard as she could. "What the hell did you do?! Why is Shikamaru in surgery?!"

Chouji grabbed her from behind and pulled her back. "Ino stop it! This isn't Temari's fault! She's the one who called us."

"Oh yeah she called us to let us know that Shikamaru was in a hospital to be **operated** on! Just what the hell happened?"

Temari rubbed her jaw and got up on her feet. "You know for such a little thing you hit pretty hard. I know you care about him and that the two of you are close. So I'll give you one free pass. But if you try that

again little girl I swear Shikamaru won't be the only one in surgery tonight."

"Just what did you do? Did he say something about your stupid hair do?"

"Listen you stupid pig I didn't do anything except get him to this hospital as fast as I could. We got separated and while we were apart he was attacked."

"Attacked? Attacked by whom? I want to know what happened!"

Temari took a deep breath and lied. "I don't know who did this or why." She thought his teammates deserved the truth. But there were other serious considerations. If it became known that Shikamaru had been attacked by a Suna nin she feared for the result.

"You damn Suna nins I *knew* we couldn't trust you."

"Ino!" Chouji spoke. "Stop it! We don't know what happened. Stop taking it out on Temari."

"Why should I?" She looked to her teammate. "If it weren't for her none of this would have happened!" She looked at Temari with real pain and hatred. "If he dies it's **your** fault!"

Temari stared back at the Leaf ninja not sure what to say. It was true; this all really was her fault.

Ino pulled something out from beneath her shirt and displayed it. "Do you know what this is?"

Temari immediately recognized the silver onyx pendant. She could also see the name on it, *Ino* . "It's a Nara's Heart." She said in a small voice. *He gave that to Ino? But I thought he loved only me.*

Ino was surprised. "So he told you about it?"

Temari nodded. "When... when did Shikamaru give that to you?"

But to the older girl's relief Ino shook her head. "Shikamaru didn't give this to me. This was from his father. Chouji has one exactly like it. We were given them shortly after being born. They represent a special connection we share with his clan. I still remember Shikaku telling me as a little girl that it meant we were beloved of the Nara clan. That we would *always* be welcomed in their home and have their protection. Chouji and I have a connection to him and to his family that you will **never** have. They have always been good to me and I love his family just like my own. If I have to go back home and tell his mother and father that their only son has died then I will... kill... you." Ino ground out the last words.

Temari heard the words and after a moment nodded. "If he dies then you should kill me."

There were many stories surrounding Gaara. In a way he had become something of a myth even though he was still a living person. Mothers who wanted to frighten their children would tell them that Gaara was waiting for them. The servants of Sabaku knew them all, and knew most of them to be true. They knew about the basement. Gaara never slept. All through the night he would be awake and would try to find ways to fill in the empty hours. He would walk the halls over and over and over. He would read. He would train with his sand. He would sit on the roof and stare at the moon when it was full. And sometimes, for no reason anyone could see, he would take someone to the basement. Maybe it was just simple boredom or perhaps some nights the blood lust was too strong to deny. But for whatever reason he would take someone he'd captured with him down into the basement. He would stay down there all night. Then he would come up, alone. There was always blood to be cleaned up, but there was never a body. The basement had a section with a sand floor. None of the servants would walk there. They all called it the, 'graveyard.' Tanya knew all this and her heart was pounding like mad inside her chest.

"Tanya," Gaara spoke in a polite calm voice. "I know you are a spy and that you changed the frequency on the radio transmitter. I want you to tell me everything you know. Please do not lie to me or attempt to hold anything back. If you do I will become very upset." With a wave of his hand the sand retreated from her mouth. She began gasping air. "Now, to begin with, who do you work for?"

Just being here in the dark with Gaara had broken her. "I serve Ossama Sulamon and House Ossama." She choked out.

"I see." Gaara was not really surprised.

He asked her questions and she answered them. It turned out she had been an outstanding spy for Sulamon. He was angry at Sulamon but not really with her, she was merely a tool. But sometimes the only way to teach someone a lesson was to break their tools.

"So how much were you paid?"

"I don't know." She sobbed. "It varied, he would reward me depending on what I told him, 100 ryu or 500 or 1,000 or 2,000. It didn't matter I didn't do it for money."

"Why then?"

"I did it because Lord Sulamon said he could help my brother. It seemed the only way." She looked up into his cold hard eyes. She gathered together all her courage. "Gaara-sama I know I have offended you and that you will kill me. But I beg you not to tell Sulamon-sama that I have betrayed him. Let my death alone be the punishment for my crimes, I beg you do not punish my brother. I want him to live free and to come home, even if I am never to see him again."

Gaara stared at her. "You risked my anger all for your brother?"

"Yes Gaara-sama."

"Do you love your brother that much?"

"I love him more than my own life! He is my *baby* brother, I have to protect him."

Gaara just stared at her. Then without a word he waved his hand. She was stunned to feel the sand releasing its grip and to watch it return to his gourd. Gaara waited for all the sand to return. He then turned around and walked to the steps. "Leave this house Tanya and never return. If you ever step foot here again I will kill you."

She didn't dare speak a word. She just sat there, her legs unwilling to hold her up, and watched him go. As soon as her knees allowed it she escaped from the house and ran home.

"He's going to be fine. He suffered from numerous injuries and broken bones, but fortunately none of those were life threatening. He had acute blood loss, but has received enough to now be in stable condition. He should be fully recovered in a few days."

The three of them all let out a collective breath and thanked the doctor.

"We're leaving tomorrow for home will he be all right to travel?" Ino asked.

The doctor frowned. "Well he should be, but we would like to hold him for twenty four hours for observation."

"Maybe we should just stay one more day. We can always catch up to the caravan on the road." Chouji said.

Ino shook her head. "No," she said firmly. "This place nearly killed him; we're not staying one hour longer than we have to."

"Can we see him?" Temari said quietly.

"Normally visiting hours would be over." He bowed slightly to Temari.
"But we can make an exception in this case."

"Thank you doctor." Temari nodded back in appreciation.

"He has been moved to room 105. He has been sedated and will not wake up until morning."

"We'll both be staying here until he wakes up." Ino said. Chouji nodded his vigorous agreement.

The three of them walked over to 105. Ino and Chouji discussing the logistics of getting everything ready for them to leave by 9 a.m. Temari wasn't paying attention. She had a lot on her mind. What kept coming back to her was that first terrible image of Shikamaru lying bleeding and motionless in the red light. She recalled exactly what it had felt like to think he was dead. And dead because of her. She knew it had nearly happened. She knew what she had to do.

Outside room 105 Temari spoke to them. "I'm afraid I have to go. Could I have just a few minutes alone with him?"

Ino tore into her. "Oh! So after nearly getting him killed you don't want to hang around? What's the matter? Got another date lined up?"

Chouji grimaced. Sometimes Ino's words could cut like a kunai. It was so obvious how hurt Temari was by this. He didn't know what had happened but he was sure she'd had nothing to do with it. "Ino," he put a hand gently on her shoulder. "You know Shikamaru would want us to let her."

Ino opened her mouth but Chouji gave her one of his very rare firm looks. She closed her mouth and gave him an annoyed face. "Fine," she mumbled. "Five minutes, and we'll be waiting right out here."

"Thank you." She said humbly. She went into the room while they waited out in the hall.

Ino stood next to her teammate and whispered to him. "Chouji, take care of my body."

His eyes widened. "Ino don't..."

Making sure there was no one else in the hallway she went through a complex set of hand signs. " **Walk Out of Body Technique.** " Her body instantly became limp. She watched as Chouji grabbed a hold of her and carefully sat her down in a nearby plastic chair.

In her astral form she didn't feel anything. She couldn't touch, taste, or smell. But she could hear and see. The Yamanaka clan had developed this technique as a means of gathering intelligence in empty rooms, or in places where possessing someone was not a good idea. Whatever her boys thought she didn't trust Temari as far as she could throw her. She walked through the wall into room 105.

She looked at him. He was sleeping peacefully in a hospital bed with an IV in his arm. She went over and crawled into the bed beside him. She placed her head carefully on his chest and listened to the sound of his heart beating. It was the most comforting sound in the entire world. She pulled her head up and looked down into his sleeping face. She moved close. This was the last time she would ever be with him and she wanted to be as close to him as she could.

"Hey lazy, it's me." She whispered to him. She touched his face. She let her fingers trace over his eyes, his nose, his cheeks, his lips, and his chin. "You know you scared me tonight. When I saw you lying there I thought you were dead and I knew it was my fault. I'm so sorry Shikamaru. I am so sorry that you had to go through this because of me. I knew it could never work between us. I knew I was never going to get to live happily ever after. Forgive me for doing this to you. Forgive me for causing you so much harm. I never meant to hurt you. It's just... I wanted it so badly."

She began to sob and needed a moment to get her voice. She knew it was foolish to say farewell to someone when they were

unconscious. But she had to; she needed to tell him everything, even if he wouldn't remember it. "You know I asked my sensei once if I had a right to be happy. I asked if I was a person or just a tool. Baki told me that I had a right to love because love could never be selfish. But he was wrong, because my love for you is completely selfish. I knew it was dangerous, Sulamon came and practically told me what he was going to do and I didn't care. You made me so happy I was ready to take any risk and face any danger to be with you. And because of that you're here now, and it's my fault."

She wrapped her arms around the boy. "I had no right to put you in danger and I beg you to forgive me. But please know that I have never loved anyone else the way I have you. When I was a little girl listening to those stories I always imagined my prince would come riding out of the desert on a white horse. I never imagined I would meet him on the arena floor in Konoha. But I did, you are my prince Shikamaru. I would love to just be with you in a little house in Konoha. I would love to spend my whole life with you and with our children. I want that more than you can imagine. But I can't have it. I want to be your fair maiden but I'm not. I am kunoichi and I am the first daughter of a noble House and I am a tool. I don't get to live happily ever after. But thank you for giving me this time with you. Thank you for loving me and for being with me." Her voice choked and she had to struggle to keep going.

"I need you to know something Shikamaru. You have made me happier in the little time we've had together than I've ever been in my life. I will always bless and thank Kami that I got the time with you that I did. And I will give offerings for your health and safety. It made me so happy when you finally told me that you loved me. I already knew, I could feel your love every time we kissed or when you held me close. But hearing you say those words set my heart free." She gently kissed his lips. "I love you Shikamaru and there is nothing in this world I would not do for you. If you gave the order I would gladly kill for you." She kissed him. "If it was your wish I would die for you." She kissed him. "If you asked me to I would live my life only for you." She pressed her lips slowly down on his. Kissing him one final time.

"And to protect you I would... never see you again and never be with you." He was so warm. She didn't want to let go of him. She wanted to wrap herself around him and never go. She let go. She got up out of the bed.

"When the Daimyo's son comes here next month I am going to tell him I accept his proposal. It's for the best. When I am the Daimyo's wife I will be able to do more good than I ever could as a kunoichi. I will never forget you Shikamaru and even if I am another man's wife you will be the only man I will ever love. I will hold you in my heart and never let you go. When I am old and grey you will still be as handsome and as young as you are right now. I will never forget you, but I beg you to forget me. Find a woman who will make you happy." She actually managed a laugh through her tears. "One that's not too ugly or too beautiful I suppose. Forget me and be happy. Don't write to me because I won't answer. Don't try to see me because I'll avoid you. Don't ever see me again because I will be as cruel and as cold to you as I can, even if it tears open my heart."

She moved to the door and just stood there looking at him. Her eyes soaking in the sight of him. She willed herself to burn this image into her mind and to never let it go. "Good bye my love."

Ino felt ashamed. All this time she had assumed that Temari was just playing games with him. All this time she had thought the older girl was just having a little fun with poor naïve Shikamaru. It never even occurred to her she might actually love him. But as she stood there and watched Temari pouring out her heart Ino felt her own heart breaking. When Temari left the room Ino ended the jutsu and returned to her body.

Chouji saw Temari exit the room crying. "Please tell him that I am very sorry. And tell him it is over between us and that I never want to see him again." Temari didn't wait for a response she hurried away as fast as she could without breaking into a run. He wanted to say

something but just at that moment Ino began to stir. By the time he looked back up she was gone.

It took Ino about five minutes to fully regain consciousness. Chouji was worried. "Are you all right? What happened?"

Ino gave him a reassuring smile. "I'm fine Chouji, it's a high level technique and I'm still not used to it. It just takes me a little while to recover. Where's Temari?"

"She left; she said she didn't want to see Shika again."

Ino shook her head. "Oh she still does Chouji; she just thinks she's protecting him."

"Ino what did you see?"

She gave him an abbreviated version. "She really loves him."

"I told you she cared for him. So what do we do now?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "We wait for him to wake up."

Temari trudged down beaten and defeated. She had always believed she was strong enough to deal with anything. But now she knew better. For what was one girl against a whole village? When she got home Gaara was waiting of course. They exchanged information.

"If I ever see Tanya again I swear I will kill her. And I'd like to kill Sulamon too." Temari said.

"Do you really want them dead?"

She looked at Gaara. From most people that would be a rhetorical question, not from him. She seriously considered it, but in the end she shook her head. "If she stays away from me I'm willing to let the bitch live. As for Sulamon I really would like to kill him, but that would start a civil war." She laughed mirthlessly. "So the old bastard gets

exactly what he wants. I'm never going to see Shikamaru again. I'm going to marry the Daimyo's son."

Gaara looked surprised. "Is that what you want?"

"No, but what does it matter what I want?"

"It matters to me sister."

She gave me a feeble smile. "Thank you Gaara that means a lot to me. But I've decided it's for the best. I don't want to see him again." She looked at herself; his blood was still on her. "I need to take a shower." She trudged up the stairs.

Gaara watched her go upstairs. He then left the house. There was something he needed to do.

"What the hell happened to you?" Kankuro gaped at her.

"It's a long story, I'll tell you tomorrow." She was too tired to deal with him right now.

"What did that stupid Leaf do to you? I swear I'll..."

Maybe she did have some energy left. She grabbed him by the collar and shoved him against the wall. "I'll tell you what he did; he nearly died because an idiot like you didn't like him dating me. You stay the hell away from him. If you ever touch him I'm taking **every** puppet in your room and starting a bonfire. Got that puppet boy?" He nodded and she let him go.

His wife knocked on the door. She put her head in and looked at him. "Dear Lord Gaara is here."

"Thank you dear please invite him in." This would be very interesting. Sulamon wondered if Gaara was here to kill him. When entered he

stood and gave him a polite bow. "Good evening Gaara. What brings you here so late at night?"

Gaara shut the door behind him and returned the bow. "There is something I wish to discuss with you."

"Yes?"

"Senya tried to kill Nara Shikamaru earlier this evening."

"I see."

"He failed."

"I assume he also died?" Gaara nodded. "That is a terrible shame; my family will mourn his loss." Sulamon spoke with a careful lack of tone.

"Will you?"

"Of course."

Gaara waited a moment to make sure nothing else was coming.

"Why did you order it?"

Sulamon gave him a look of well practiced surprise. "Gaara he was not acting under any orders. Whatever he did he did for his own reasons. As a Council member you can check all mission logs. I assure you that you will find no record of any mission for my grandson."

"Please do not insult my intelligence. We both know the assassination of a foreign ninja would not be logged. It would be strictly handled as a hands mission."

"Shall we speak in the hypothetical then?"

"If that will make this easier then yes."

"Very well, hypothetically speaking if I *were* to have ordered the death of Shikamaru it would have been done to guard the security of Suna. A marriage between his clan and Sabaku would not only have posed a security risk of the highest order it would have caused serious doubt among the public as to the loyalty of House Sabaku."

"I see."

"Does Temari still intend to favor him?"

"May I speak hypothetically?"

"Of course."

And at that moment Gaara did something that chilled Sulamon's soul. He smiled. A very big, very happy smile. Sulamon felt a murderous killer intent ooze off the boy. "Hypothetically speaking, it's none of your damn business. You have hurt my sister, and I am here to make sure that does not happen again. I am putting you on notice that as of right now I am placing Nara Shikamaru under the protection of my House. Anyone who attacks him will be attacking me. And before you think about how to arrange an, 'accident,' for him keep in mind that if I suspect anything at all I will hold you responsible."

"And what would you do then? Will you come here and murder me?"

"No, I won't harm you at all."

"That is good to hear."

"I will come here and I will kill your wife." Sulamon stared at him in shock. "Then I will kill your sons and daughters. Then I will kill your grandchildren. I will kill every single person in your clan with a drop of your blood. But you I'll leave you alive to mourn them."

Sulamon gaped at him. "You wouldn't dare."

Gaara laughed. "How many people have I killed in Suna? Even I've lost count."

"If you attack House Oosama you will start a civil war!"

Gaara's smile faded away and his polite façade returned. "Someone I respect once told me he would do anything to protect his precious people. I feel the same way. I have no wish to kill anyone, but if I must I will. I will protect my sister whatever the cost." Gaara paused a bit. "I would like your promise that you will not do anything to harm Nara Shikamaru now or in the future."

Sulamon slowly nodded. "I give you my solemn word, in the name of my clan that I shall cause Nara Shikamaru no harm."

Gaara nodded. "Thank you that is all I came here for. Thank you for your time I will show myself out."

"You know Gaara I truly believed you had changed. But I see I was wrong."

"I have changed, my old self would not have cared about my sister's pain."

"Your father would not have put Temari's wishes ahead of the good of Suna."

"If you are saying I am not like the Kazekage then I thank you."

Sulamon stared at him. "Please consider my offer of marriage to Alyssa to be revoked. And I ask you not to return to this House again."

Gaara nodded. "As you wish. You are also asked not to enter my home."

Sulamon nodded. "Let me make you one additional promise tonight. On the honor of my clan I swear to you that you will **never** be Kazekage."

Gaara simply looked at him. "We shall see." He bowed politely.
"Goodnight Sulamon."

She had showered and put on some clean clothes. But despite being exhausted she couldn't sleep. She went up to the roof and looked out at the stars. Gaara found her sitting there. He told her of his meeting.

"Sulamon will not attack him again."

"Thank you Gaara, thank you for doing that, but what about your dream of becoming Kazekage and protecting this village?"

"I will be Kazekage whatever Sulamon may wish. Since Shikamaru is no longer in danger do you still not wish to see him?"

She looked up at the stars. "Sulamon isn't the only idiot in Suna."
She said nothing more.

What was that horrible noise? It sounded like a giant buzz saw devouring wood. He opened one eye. Of course, it was Chouji. *I can sleep through any alarm clock ever made but not through his snoring.* It took him a moment to orient himself. He was in a hospital bed. Chouji was asleep in a chair to his right. Looking over there was Ino curled up in a chair to his left. He looked around the room, no Temari. Maybe she was getting breakfast or something. He sat up in the bed and yawned. He felt sore as hell, but nothing really hurt anymore.

His yawn was enough to wake Ino. "Shikamaru you're awake!" She got up from her seat and gave him a crushing hug. "How are you?"

"Ack... Ino... you're crushing me." She let go of him and he was able to breathe again.

Chouji opened his eyes. "Shika!" Once again he was in a bear hug. Seeing this Ino joined in again. He loved his friends dearly but they really were squeezing him to death.

Once he had them convinced he really was all right he asked about the most important thing. "Where's Temari?"

The two of them shared a look. Finally it was Chouji that spoke up. "She was the one who brought you here. She stayed until you were out of surgery and in your room. She saw you for a few minutes. Then she left crying saying she was sorry and that she didn't want to see you again."

Shikamaru stared at his best friend. "She said that?" Chouji nodded. *She doesn't want to see me?* He had a foggy memory of telling her that he loved her and her saying it back to him. But he wasn't sure if it was real or not. Had she decided after last night that dating him was just too much trouble? He really wanted to see her, but he was still team leader and he had a mission to carry out. "Chouji what time is it?"

"A little after 7:30."

Shikamaru nodded. He saw his clothes and his vest were sitting by the bed. "All right, I'll get dressed and we'll head back to the hotel to get a quick bite and get our things. Then we'll head out to the gate."

"What about Temari?" Ino asked worriedly.

Shikamaru shook his head. "I don't have time to see her now. I'll write to her when I'm back in Konoha and find out what's going on."

Ino stood and shook her head violently. "That'll be too late. Shikamaru you have to see her now or you're going to lose her forever."

"Since when do *you* want me to see Temari?" He asked suspiciously.

"Since I found out she really loves you. She only said what she did because she's trying to protect you. You have to see her before you go or you're going to lose her."

He was amazed to hear this coming from Ino of all people. But he shook his head. "I can't just blow off the mission."

Ino let out an exasperated snort. *Men!* She sat back down. "Fine we'll do this the hard way." She went through some hand signs. "You'll thank me for this later."

"Ino..."

" **Mind Body Switch Technique.** " Ino went limp in the chair.

Chouji jumped out of his seat. "Ino what are you doing?"

Shikamaru smiled. "Relax Chouji, I just figured it would be easier for me to show him than tell him what Temari is feeling."

"You know he's going to be really mad at you for taking him over without permission."

Shikamaru waved that away. "Oh, I'm sure he'll forgive me." Suddenly Shikamaru sat up straighter and let out a girlish giggle. "Ooooh, I *knew* it."

"What?" Chouji asked.

"I just saw the memory of that first dinner with Temari. I *knew* she was the one to make the move." Shikamaru giggled some more. "Wow, he has **a lot** of memories of kissing her; those two have been really busy."

Chouji looked around nervously. "Ino maybe you shouldn't be looking at his memories."

"Ok, you can't blame a girl for being curious." Suddenly he had a huge smile. "Oh! He thinks her kisses taste like cherries. Chouji,

what do you think my kisses would taste like?"

Chouji looked as though he were choking. "Ino, I know it's you but hearing Shikamaru say that kind of freaks me out."

Shikamaru laughed. "Ok, ok, I've given him the memories he needs." Shikamaru brought his hands together. "Release."

Ino stirred awake in the chair as Shikamaru shook his head. They both looked at each other. "Thanks Ino, but never do that again."

"Sure."

"All right change of plans. You two head back to the hotel and get all our stuff. I'll meet you at the gate at nine."

"What are you going to do?" Chouji asked.

"I'm going to go see my girlfriend."

As he entered the Sabaku compound Gaara came out the front door to meet him.

"I'm sorry Shikamaru but I'm afraid Temari does not want to see you."

"I am not leaving here until I talk to her."

Gaara looked surprised as Shikamaru tried to walk past him. "I wasn't making a request Shikamaru." Sand came out of his gourd and quickly covered Shikamaru completely from the neck down.

Shikamaru gave him a bored expression. "I am still not leaving."

Gaara just stared at him coldly. "You do know I can crush the life from you with one gesture of my hand?"

"No one's disputing that."

The two of them just stared at each other in silence for a couple of minutes. Surprisingly it was Gaara who finally spoke. "Aren't you afraid I'm going to kill you?"

"A little," he admitted. "But I'm much more afraid of losing Temari."

They stared at each other again for a couple of minutes. Finally Gaara waved a hand and the sand began sliding off him and back into the gourd. "You will find her on the roof."

"Thanks Gaara." Shikamaru hurried inside.

As he went up the stairs he saw Kankuro on the second floor landing. "You going to attack me?" Shikamaru asked.

"Nope." Kankuro said. Shikamaru passed him as he hurried up the stairs to the roof. "I still don't like you."

"I still don't care."

She was sitting on the roof looking out at the morning sky when she heard someone approach her. She didn't bother to see who it was. "Leave me alone."

"I would if I could, but I can't so I won't."

She jumped to her feet and looked at him. "What are you doing here? I told Gaara I didn't want to see you."

"I know he put me in sand and threatened to kill me. But when I told him I wasn't leaving without seeing you he let me go."

She didn't know what to feel. She'd spent all night trying to accept that she would never see him again. Now here he was, smirking at her with that adorable little grin of his. *How does he always manage to make things hard for me?* She took in a deep breath. She knew what she had to do. "Hey lazy didn't your friends tell you it's over?"

Listen I had a little fun but you're just too much of a *boy* for me. I need a real man and I'm afraid you just don't fit the bill. So go back home and find yourself some soft little girl, because this *woman* is bored with you." She laughed and began to walk away from him.

" **Shadow Possession Technique.** " She suddenly was frozen in place.

"What the hell do you think your doing? Let go of me right now!"

He took a few steps so they were standing face to face. He gently touched her cheek and she touched his. "I'm not leaving until I've talked to you."

"Shikamaru if you don't let go of me right now I'll scream for Gaara and he'll probably kill you."

"Go ahead."

She stared at him. "I'm not bluffing."

"Scream all you want no one's stopping you."

"What part of, 'I'm not interested,' do you not understand?"

"Well I suppose I'm trying to understand how that connects with everything you said in my hospital room last night."

She suddenly felt her face become very red. "You... you couldn't have heard that... you were unconscious."

"I know that you said you would kill or die or live for me and that you would stay away from me to keep me safe."

She stared at him. "You heard that?" She said weakly.

He nodded. He put his arms around her and held her close. "I know that you love me Temari." He drew his lips to hers.

"Don't..." He kissed her, and she just melted into the kiss. She shut her eyes and kissed him back. *I shouldn't do this; it will only make things harder.* She opened her eyes and pulled her lips back. "You're using your jutsu to force me to kiss you."

He smirked at her. "Temari I deactivated the jutsu before I put my arms around you. I would never force you to kiss me."

She stepped back and pulled out of his embrace. "Shikamaru this can't work don't you understand that?" She shut her eyes and tried to hold back the tears. "Why are you making this so hard for me?"

"Because I love you and refuse to let you go."

"What has your love gotten you? You almost died last night!"

"So? Temari it was the *third* time I've nearly died." He grinned at her. "Actually I feel like I'm improving since I didn't need you or Asuma to save me this time."

"Don't joke about this! When I found you last night I thought you were dead! I thought you had died because of me! Don't you understand I can't bear the thought of you being hurt because of me?"

"I understand, but Temari it's a risk I am willing to take." She was about to interrupt but he put a finger to her lips. "Listen to me. We are shinobi and we know our lives are *always* in danger. There are no guarantees. Whether I am with you or not I will still be in danger so long as I am a ninja and so will you. I know how you must have felt last night. When I imagine losing you it tears my heart out. But whether we are together or not I would feel the same if anything happened to you. Nothing is guaranteed, but I know that whatever time I have I want to spend it with you. I love you."

She looked at him. She tried to say something cruel something that would push him away, but she couldn't. Looking at the love in his eyes she couldn't bring herself to hurt him or push him away. She

didn't want to push him away. She put her arms around his neck and sobbed. "I love you too."

He held her close and let her cry. He whispered in her ear that it would be all right, that everything would be all right. He held her and comforted her until the tears finally passed and she seemed better.

"Temari," he whispered in her ear. "Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"Just trust me." She did. He took something out of his vest. "Now open them."

She opened her eyes to see him holding a silver onyx pendant. On the central band she saw a name engraved, *Temari*. She stared at him in wonder. "Are you giving me your heart?"

He smiled at her. "That's right you troublesome woman. If you accept this it means that you will be the only woman I will ever love or pursue." He smirked at her. "It also means you won't ever be able to get rid of me."

She carefully took the Nara's Heart from him. "Shikamaru I accept your heart and I swear I will always guard and treasure it." She put it around her neck. With that done she put her arms around him and kissed him.

Gaara and Kankuro were waiting on the second floor landing as they came down the stairs arm in arm.

Gaara asked his sister. "Have you changed your mind about not seeing Shikamaru any more?"

Temari actually laughed. "Why? Is it that obvious?"

He looked to Shikamaru. "Do you love my sister?"

"Yes." He answered without the slightest hesitation.

"Do you want to marry her?"

"I *am* going to marry her just as soon as I turn sixteen."

"Oh really?" Temari cut in smiling at him with a hint of trouble.

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

"What?"

She shook her head. "You haven't *asked* me yet lazy."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Do I *need* to ask you?"

She began poking his ribs. "Yes you do."

He rolled his eyes. "Fine, want to get married you unbelievably troublesome woman?"

She let go of his arm and crossed her arms across her chest. "Not if you're going to ask me like that." Gaara coughed and gave his sister an annoyed look. "Fine, Nara Shikamaru I accept your incredibly unromantic proposal."

Gaara nodded. "Shikamaru sixteen is also the minimum age to marry here as it is in Konoha. However, if you wish there *is* a ceremony that can be performed now."

Temari gave her younger brother a huge smile. "Gaara, really?" He nodded.

Shikamaru saw how excited Temari was. "If it's something Temari wants then of course."

"Very well, come with me." Gaara led them down the hall.

He took them to a small room at the northern end of the hallway. It was the Sabaku family chapel. The four of them entered and shut

the door. Gaara spoke. "Shikamaru let me explain what is to take place here. As head of Sabaku I will perform a betrothal ceremony. While you will not be legally married this ceremony *will* bind our two clans together with a *blood tie* . Once the ceremony is complete we will consider you to be part of this family. Now, unfortunately marriages between clans of different villages are usually only allowed as part of an alliance between those villages. While technically not illegal, I believe you have seen firsthand that some people have strong feelings about the issue. Therefore, for both your safety and Temari's I ask that you keep this secret."

"For how long?" Shikamaru asked.

"Until either the wedding or until an alliance is formed between Konoha and Suna."

"But we're already allies." Shikamaru pointed out.

"We are tacit allies true, but there is currently no formal treaty of alliance between our two villages. Until one is signed it would be dangerous to make this betrothal common knowledge."

"So I can't tell *anyone* I have a fiancé?"

"You can tell your parents and the Hokage can also be informed as this involves an alliance between two clans. But no one else must know, not even your teammates or your sensei." He paused.

"Actually your parents *should* be consulted prior to this ceremony."

"It's all right Gaara." Temari took out the Nara's Heart. "This is a symbol of their approval of me as a wife for their son." She turned to Shikamaru. "Your parents did have this commissioned right?" He nodded. "We can consider it a symbol of their consent."

"Very well. There is however one more issue to consider. As the betrothal is to be kept secret Temari will have to maintain the illusion that she is still being courted. This will have to include certain amounts of interaction with suitors."

Shikamaru frowned. "You are not telling me that Temari will be going out on *dates* are you?"

To his horror Gaara nodded. "She will need to attend the festivals and dances and there will be occasional dinners." Before Shikamaru could say anything Temari spoke.

"Hey, you can trust me. And the dinners will all be chaperoned with Gaara there. I doubt anyone would try anything. And if they did they'd regret it."

"All right I suppose. Hey, should I *pretend* to date too?"

"Sure!" Temari gave him a sweet smile.

"Really?"

"Absolutely, as long as you want me to come up there and beat you and the girl to death with my fan. No ones courting *you* Shikamaru, so I had better not hear anything about you and any other girls!"

"I was just asking."

Gaara held up a long piece of brilliant white silk. "Temari hold out your arms, palms upward. Shikamaru place your arms on top of hers." They did as instructed. He began to wrap their arms together. "I bind you together into one common future and one common fate, whatever comes you shall be bound as one. Nara Shikamaru I betroth to you my sister and charge you to protect her, to make her enemies your enemies, and to always provide her with water and shade. I welcome you into this clan and swear to protect you, make your enemies my enemies, and provide for you water and shade." Gaara then went over and to Shikamaru's surprise kissed his cheek. "You are my brother." Gaara paused. "The ceremony now requires you to say the same and kiss my cheek."

Feeling a bit weird he nodded. "You are my brother." He kissed Gaara's cheek.

Kankuro then came up to him. "Don't get the wrong idea." He shook his head amused. "You are my brother." He kissed Shikamaru's cheek.

"You are my brother." He carefully kissed Kankuro's cheek trying to avoid his make up.

Temari had tears in her eyes as she leaned forward. "You are my betrothed and one day you shall be my husband." She kissed his lips. He looked at her questioningly and she nodded.

"You are my betrothed and one day you shall be wife." He kissed her.

"It is done." Gaara said.

They were walking arm in arm out to the gate. "I want to marry you on my sixteenth birthday."

She nodded and gave him a knowing smile. "That'll at least make it easier for you to remember our anniversaries."

"Will you move to Konoha once we're married?"

"Of course," she answered without hesitation. "I'll miss my brothers but I know I can be happy there with you. I don't think you could ever be completely happy without your precious clouds."

"You already know I want two kids right? A girl and then a boy?"

"Are you placing an order?" She laughed. "We'll have at *least* two, but I may want a big family."

He leered at her. "I'll do my part."

She gave him a sweet smile. "You sure will, and your part will include changing a whole lot of diapers." They continued walking. "You know you're going to have to get a new dream."

"What do you mean?"

"Well to start with you are marrying a girl who is *very* beautiful." She giggled. "Also you're not going to be just an average ninja you have way too much intelligence and potential for that. I expect to be Jonin by the time you turn sixteen and you had better be one too or we're not getting married."

"What?!" He came to a halt. "You won't marry me if I'm not a Jonin?"

She nodded. "That's right; there is no way my husband is going to be of a lesser rank than me. I've seen what you can do you have the skills to be Jonin; you just need to apply yourself. So you can consider this motivation." She got them walking again. "Now, what goal should you set?"

"Goal? Woman I'm starting a huge family and becoming a Jonin! Isn't that enough?"

"For you probably, but not for me. I told you a long time ago lazy you were going to need a wife who wouldn't let you sleep all day. Now how does Hokage sound?"

He stared at her in horror. "Woman do you have any idea how much *work* it is to be Hokage? Besides I already know who the next Hokage will be."

She looked at him in surprise. "Has Tsunade chosen a successor?"

"Not officially, but it's obvious who she will choose."

"Who?"

"Your friend and mine, Uzumaki Naruto."

"Naruto?! Are you serious? I mean I really like and respect him for what he did for Gaara. But how can he be Hokage?"

"Simple, the easiest way to be Hokage is to be nominated by the current Hokage and approved by the Council. Naruto is Jiraiya's student and helped him bring her back to Konoha to be installed. During that mission he was able to master the Rasengan, a special attack jutsu and use it to defeat Kabuto. Tsunade gave him a unique necklace that was originally from the Shodai, our founder and her grandfather. That necklace is a symbol that she considers him a worthy successor to the title of Hokage. And if you'd ever seen him yelling and calling her, 'grandma,' you'd know she has a special place for him in her heart. Naruto will be her successor."

"I see... well then I think I know what your goal is going to have to be."

"What?"

"You're going to have to become Chief Advisor to the Hokage."

"Are you serious?"

"Well are you serious about Naruto becoming your Rokudaime Hokage?" He nodded. "Well then think about it. While I like him he's not the sharpest kunai in the pouch. I mean anyone who would spray paint your monument in broad daylight is going to be in serious need of help."

He sighed. "Knowing Naruto that's true."

"Think about your village. For the good of your entire village you need to be there to help him make wise decisions."

He thought about it. "Boy this is going to be troublesome."

They reached the gate at nine just as the first wagons began moving. Chouji and Ino greeted them. Ino surprised Temari by giving her a hug and promising to take her shopping the next time she was in Konoha. Chouji let her know he was glad to see them together again. His friends left them to say their final good byes alone.

He wrapped his arms around her. "I hate leaving you."

"I know, I hate seeing you go." She smiled at him. "You know I just thought of something."

"What's that?"

"Remember in the hospital when I hugged you and you invited me to dinner?"

"Of course."

"I almost didn't, I was afraid you would push me away."

He smiled. "Good thing you're so brave then." He touched her cheek gently and leaned in close. "In Suna we say good bye to our loved ones with a kiss. That is true right?"

"It is." They shared one last kiss.

"Good bye my troublesome woman."

"Good bye my lazy ninja."

She stood there and watched him go. She was a bit sad, but compared to what she had been feeling just a couple of hours ago it was nothing. She reached beneath her clothes and pulled out the pendant. In the bright morning sun the silver sparkled. She had his heart and she would never lose it. That was more than enough.

An epilogue

Author's Note: This is the last chapter and brings Invitation to its conclusion. Twenty two chapters, over 80,000 words, over 13,000 hits, and over 130 reviews. Not bad for a story that was originally going to be a one shot. I hope everyone has enjoyed my story. I have thoughts on a couple possible sequels but I will decide about that later. Thanks for all the reviews and kind words.

Seven days Later

She lit the incense on the altar and then fell to her knees, hands pressed together in prayer. She was making an offering to Kami for Shikamaru's safety and well being. She'd made one every morning since he'd left and would continue to do so whenever she was home or had access to a temple. She found the ritual to be oddly comforting. She wasn't really sure that she believed in it, but if nothing else it gave her the illusion she was doing something to protect him.

"Breakfast is ready." Kankuro called to her from the door.

"I'll be down in a minute." She looked over to him. "Did you manage not to burn it this time?"

He frowned at her. "Hey, I never said I was a cook."

She grinned. "Oh but you look so cute in that apron."

"You know that joke got really old really fast."

"Well get used to it you still have two more weeks." She got up and bowed to the altar. "Come on, you haven't forgotten that we've been assigned to teach some students basic weapons have you?"

He grumbled. "No, and why do we have to do it?"

"Think of it as an honor, they respect our abilities."

"Yeah some honor, you know that the two of us are going to have to do all the work don't you? We're supposed to let them choose who they want to instruct them. There's no way any of them will pick Gaara."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. I wouldn't be surprised if at least one or two chose him. I mean he is the strongest ninja in the village."

"But they all know his reputation. I bet they all try and stay away from him."

She looked over to her brother. "Did I hear the word, 'bet'?"

He looked and nodded. "What have you got in mind sis?"

"How about we bet that he gets at least one student to ask for him as instructor?"

He nodded. "All right, what terms?"

"How about if you win I let you out of the rest of your cooking. If I win you have to go on three *real* dates with a girl I pick, and you're not allowed to see anyone else for two weeks."

He laughed. "You trying to find me a wife?"

"Yes as a matter of fact, and the girl I have in mind is already on your list of suitors so she's definitely worthy of consideration."

That got him a bit curious. "It's a long list, who do you have in mind?"

Temari shook her head. "I'll tell you her name if you lose." She held out her hand. "Bet?"

He took her hand and shook it. "Bet."

Temari was satisfied that there was no way she could lose. If Kankuro won that meant she would be spared two weeks of eating burnt oatmeal. So she was a winner either way. As they neared the kitchen there was a definite odor of smoke. She turned on her brother. "You burned it *again* didn't you?!"

"I never said I was a cook."

Tsunade looked at the four documents Shikamaru had just handed her. She stared at the young Chunin in surprise. "My, my, my Shikamaru it looks like for once I don't have to send Shizune after you to turn in your paperwork." Her assistant giggled. "Maybe I should send you to Suna more often, it does seem to light a fire under you."

"Hokage-sama I would be happy to accept any missions to Suna you wish to assign me."

She gave Shizune a knowing grin. "Oh I'll just bet you would be." She looked over the first sheet. "I'm a bit surprised the mission report is only one page."

Shikamaru shrugged. "We carried out the mission of providing protection and general security to the caravan. We didn't encounter any bandits or other problems on the way there or back."

"Really? Then why did I receive a message from the Council of Wind apologizing for one of their ninja striking you?"

"That incident took place while I was off duty and so was not a part of the mission." Though he didn't show it he felt relieved. Gaara had told him that the Council would not want it known that he had been attacked by or that he had killed a Suna ninja. The Council would cover everything up including his visit to the hospital. Like the Council he had very strong reasons not to want the relations between the two villages damaged. He had sworn Chouji and Ino to

secrecy. If the Hokage didn't already know about it then she probably never would.

"Well since the Council sent me a formal apology I believe that you are blameless but I want a report of the, 'incident,' on my desk by tomorrow morning."

"Hai Hokage-sama."

She looked at the next document which was a formal two page proposal. "Interesting idea about issuing radio communicators to all teams. I'll have a cost benefits analysis performed, though I suspect the cost may be prohibitive." She went on to the third document. It was a one page request. Upon reading it she sent Shikamaru a look of utter shock. "Are you serious about this?"

"Hokage-sama I would not waste your time if I were not."

"What is it?" Shizune asked curiously.

Tsunade handed the paper over to her assistant. "It seems our young Chunin here is looking for a promotion." She smiled at him. "You do know that becoming Jonin means *more* work not less don't you?"

He nodded and did not look happy. "I understand that, but I have reasons why I need to become Jonin."

Tsunade laughed. "Would any of them happen to involve a certain blonde haired Suna nin?" When he didn't reply she moved on to the fourth document. It was actually a letter with: *For the Hokage's eyes only*, written on it. She began to open it.

"I beg pardon Hokage-sama, but I respectfully ask that you and I be the only ones in the room when you open that."

She eyed him warily. "I don't keep many secrets from Shizune."

"But you do keep some?" He asked.

She leaned back in her chair holding the envelope. "Do you really think what's in here is that important?" He nodded. "Shizune would you mind..."

"Not at all! I'll be right outside when you need me."

"This had better not be a waste of my time." She opened the letter and read it. It was short and to the point. When she was done she put it down and stared at him. "Congratulations."

"Thank you Hokage-sama."

"Have you picked a date?"

"We plan to marry on my sixteenth birthday."

"Not wasting any time I see. Any objection to me performing the ceremony?"

"None at all! She and I would both be greatly honored."

"So who else knows about this?"

"Me, Temari, Gaara, and Kankuro; they have all agreed to keep it secret. I would however like to inform my parents."

Tsunade nodded. "Well they should definitely know that they're going to get a daughter in law. I am declaring this to be an S-rank secret. You may inform you parents but you will also have to tell them they may not share it with anyone else. Anyone who spreads this information will end up in a cell." Shikamaru nodded, it was what he expected.

Before Tsunade could say anything else there was a loud noise from the other side of the door. The door burst open and in stormed a blonde and orange fireball. Shizune followed and shut the door behind her.

"Hey baachan I want to talk to you!"

"Damn it brat stop calling me that! Call me Hokage or Lady Tsunade like everyone else!" Tsunade placed the crumpled up letter in an ash tray and with a quick jutsu lit it.

Naruto stood in front of her desk and stubbornly crossed his arms. "I am sick of waiting I want to go after Sasuke right now!"

She shut her eyes feeling a headache coming on. "I've already told you a hundred times why you can't do that. And how many times have I told you not to barge in here? In case you didn't notice I was having a meeting with Shikamaru."

He hadn't noticed. He looked over to where the Chunin was standing with his usual bored expression. "Oh hey Shikamaru didn't see you standing there. How are you doing?"

"Fine," he answered. "Say Naruto I wanted to ask you something."

"What?"

"I was just wondering, have you always known you were the Kyuubi's container?" Three sets of eyes shot to him and three jaws all dropped. "What?"

"So are you sure you're ok with this? You really are still going to be my friend?"

Shikamaru let out an exasperated sigh. The two of them had left the Hokage Tower and were walking together. "Yes Naruto I'm fine with it, and yes for the hundredth time we are still friends."

"You know you can't tell anyone right?"

"Naruto that was you standing beside me when Tsunade explained about the Sandaime's law wasn't it?"

"I'm sorry, it's just I don't have that many precious people I don't want to lose any of them because they hate what's in me."

Shikamaru stopped and turned to the other boy. He put a hand on his shoulder. "Naruto listen very carefully because I'm not going to say this twice. I consider you to be a true friend and we Nara's **never** abandon our friends. Now come on I'll buy you some ramen."

"Seriously!" The boy's mood instantly brightened.

"Sure, why not? I just got a mission check."

Naruto was bouncing, there was nothing like free ramen to cure all his worries. "Hey Shikamaru, is it true you're dating Gaara's sister? I remember him asking about you when I was in the hospital."

He nodded. "Thanks by the way for what you said to him. If you hadn't I wouldn't be with Temari now."

"So is she really your girlfriend?"

No, she's really my fiancé. "She sure is."

Naruto nudged his ribs and gave him a ridiculous wink. "So have you kissed her?"

He gave the boy a flat look. "You know Naruto you sound like that other annoying blonde in my life. But yeah, we've kissed."

"What was it like?" Naruto asked eagerly.

"Amazing."

Naruto laughed. "You are soooo lucky Shikamaru! Every time I ask Sakura for a date she just yells at me and sometimes she hits me."

Shikamaru shrugged. "If it makes you feel any better Temari hits me too, and sometimes she does it with a seventy pound fan."

"Yeah, but you get kisses too! Man I wish I had a pretty girl that liked me the way you do."

He looked at the blonde. "Naruto."

"Yeah?"

"You're an idiot."

"Hey! Why'd you say that?!"

"Because it's true." Seeing the boy wanting to argue he added. "So what kind of ramen do you want?" Having known Chouji all these years he knew how to sidetrack someone.

As they continued walking they talked about their most recent missions. Naruto had recently gotten back from a mission with team eight that had been trying to capture a special bug. "So I was standing there and this super pretty girl was dancing in the waterfall under the moon. You should have seen her, she was amazing."

"And you have no idea who this girl could possibly be?"

"No, it's a total mystery."

"I see, listen by any chance when you got up was Hinata in the tent asleep?"

Naruto suddenly halted. "Hey! Now that you mention it she wasn't."

Shikamaru nodded. "So just as you were watching this girl in the waterfall Hinata happened to be out of the tent. Does this information suggest anything to you?"

Naruto seemed to think about it. Suddenly his eyes lit up. "Hey yeah! I just realized something!"

About time. "What's that?"

"Maybe Hinata saw the girl too! I should go ask her!"

Shikamaru stared at him glumly. "Naruto remember when I called you an idiot a little while ago? Well I take it back."

"Really?"

"Yes, calling you an idiot is an insult to idiots everywhere." He shook his head. "And you're going to be the next Hokage? Konoha is doomed."

"Hey! I am going to be the next Hokage! Believe it!"

"I do believe it that's the problem." Shikamaru let out a long sigh. "Naruto I've just come to a very painful decision. As troublesome as I know it's going to be I've decided that when you become Hokage I want to be your Chief Advisor."

Naruto stared at him and crossed his arms over his chest. "Oh yeah? Well why should I let you tell me what to do when you keep calling me an idiot?"

"Because if you don't I fear Konoha will sink into the ocean."

Naruto stared at him. "But we're in the middle of the land."

"Yes, but you would probably find a way." Naruto just stared at him. "Listen I'll tell you what, I'll show you why you should follow my advice. Now you say you want a girlfriend right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Well if you follow my advice not only do I guarantee you'll get a girlfriend but she'll be as pretty as the girl in the waterfall."

Naruto stared at him. "No way! I'll never get a girl like that."

Shikamaru smiled at him. "Care to make a bet? I'll bet that if you do *exactly* as I say you'll have a girlfriend by the end of the day."

"What happens if I don't?"

"I'll buy you all the free ramen you can eat for a month."

Naruto's eyes exploded and his jaw dropped. " **FREE RAMEN FOR A MONTH!!**"

Shikamaru stuck a finger in his ear. "That's right, but you have to do *exactly* as I say. And if I win I want two things. First you promise that you'll appoint me Chief Advisor when you become Hokage. And secondly I want..."

Naruto laughed. "Yeah right, like I'd do that. Very funny Shikamaru."

"I'm absolutely serious Naruto. Those are the terms of the bet." He stuck out his hand. "Now are you in or are you going to chicken out?" And just as Shikamaru had known he would Naruto grabbed his hand and pumped it.

"I *never* chickenout and I never go back on my word, that's my ninja way."

"Glad to hear it." He grabbed Naruto's arm and began dragging him away. "Now let's go get you a girlfriend."

"Hey Ichiraku's is this way."

"We're going to the Yamanaka flower shop first."

"But you said you were going to buy me some ramen!" He whined.

"I still am but we need to take care of this first."

Team eight was just finishing up its training when they noticed two visitors approaching training ground eighteen. Hinata suddenly felt her cheeks turn red when she saw one of them was Naruto. They turned another shade darker when she saw what he was carrying.

"This is so stupid, Hinata's going to laugh at me, so will everyone else." Naruto complained.

Shikamaru sighed, he'd been complaining all the way from the flower shop. Would it really be so bad to have Konoha sink into the ocean? "She won't laugh, though I don't know about Kiba. Now you know what you're supposed to say?"

"Yeah."

Shikamaru laughed and gave him a nudge forward. "Well go get her Romeo."

Naruto sent him a glare but got going.

As he approached Hinata she felt her heart pounding furiously in her chest and her index fingers nervously pressing together. For her part Kurenai stood back and just smiled. Kiba laughed and Shino merely stood there watching passively.

As he got near her he suddenly felt very nervous. *It's just Hinata why should I be nervous?* He wondered if she was feeling all right, she looked really red. He noticed Kiba was grinning at him like an idiot. He would have stopped and turned around but he'd given his word. When he stood in front of her he took a deep breath.

"These are for you Hinata-chan." He handed her the bouquet of lilies he'd been carrying. "I want you to know that even though it's only been a couple days I missed you and I think you're beautiful."

Did Naruto-kun just call me beautiful? Did he just call me Hinata-chan? "Th... Thank you... Naruto-kun." She took the flowers from him. They were lilies, her favorites. "They're beautiful... I... really love... them."

The way she was looking at him was making him feel strange. He suddenly noticed that she really was very cute. How had he never

noticed that before? He gulped down some air. "Hinata-chan would you go out on a date with me?"

Her reaction was immediate and in character, she fainted. Kiba and Shino were both there to catch her before she hit the ground. They gently put her on the grass and Kiba checked her pulse. Suddenly he looked up at Naruto "She's dead! Naruto you killed her!"

Naruto stared at them in complete shock. " **What?!**"

Kiba grabbed his sides and fell to the ground howling with laughter.

Shino shook his head. "Please forgive my teammate's foolishness, she has merely passed out I am certain she will recover in a few minutes."

Naruto turned back to Shikamaru. "I told you she didn't feel that way! You owe me that ramen!"

He rolled his eyes. "She hasn't answered you yet Naruto."

Kurenai approached the two boys with an amused look. "What is this about you two?"

"I am preserving Konoha from imminent disaster." Shikamaru replied. Before Kurenai could ask anything more Hinata opened her eyes.

She looked up to see Naruto kneeling over her with a worried look.

"Hinata I'm sorry are you..."

"Yes!" She replied fiercely, afraid he might change his mind.

"Huh?"

She sat up and, 'glomped,' onto him. "Yes Naruto-kun, yes I will go on a date with you!"

He looked at her amazed. He was surprised, but was very happy to see how excited she was at the thought of a date with him. As she continued to hold onto him he felt a tap on his shoulder. He looked up to see Shikamaru smirking down at him.

"Congratulations on your new girlfriend." He handed Naruto a 50 ryu note. "Here, that should be plenty for the two of you to get some ramen together. Since I know you never go back on your word I'll see you at the Hokage Tower tomorrow at noon."

Naruto looked up from where Hinata was holding him. The abject fear was obvious. "Shikamaru you're not serious about that?"

"I told you I was Naruto."

Hinata looked between the two of them. "Naruto-kun what is he talking about?"

Shikamaru stuck his hands in his pockets and began to slouch away. "Oh just come to the Hokage Tower tomorrow at noon and you'll see." He waved good bye to them. "Have fun on your date."

Tanya was leaving the café and heading home. She was not sure what she was supposed to do now. She was happy just to be alive. For now she was content simply to enjoy life. Eventually she would get a new job, but she had 40,000 ryu stashed away and was in no hurry to find employment. Sulamon had not contacted her and she was not sure whether or not he ever would. She was not going to contact him.

"Tanya."

Hearing her name she instinctively turned around. She felt a fist crash into her mouth. The next thing she knew she was looking up at a very angry looking Temari as she spat out blood. "Temari-sama I..."

"Shut up," she said menacingly. Wisely the girl did exactly that. She could feel the killer intent radiating off the younger girl. "I came here to give you this." She tossed a piece of paper at her. "Don't say anything, don't waste your breathe or my time. I know why you did it. I understand it but I won't forgive your betrayal or the fact you put the man I love in danger. Consider that your severance, and it's more than you deserve." Temari turned around and stomped away.

Tanya carefully looked down at the piece of paper. She smoothed it out and read it. Her breath caught, it was a government notice. Her brother had just been returned and was currently in Suna Hospital to receive treatment for malnutrition. With a shout of joy despite the pain in her mouth she ran to see her baby brother.

Shikamaru finally got home in the late afternoon. He found both his mom and dad in the kitchen. He could smell dinner cooking. He put his back pack down by the door and sat down in the chair across from his dad. His mom was standing by the oven.

"Hey mom are we having steak tonight?"

"Of course we are dear. Don't we always when you or your father comes back from a long mission?"

"Do you think I could have mine medium rare?"

She looked at him in surprise. "You don't want it well done?"

He shook his head. "Say dad, thanks for teaching me that teleportation jutsu."

Shikaku looked at him. "Your very welcome son. Anytime you want to learn some more of our family jutsus just let me know."

Shikamaru nodded. "How about tomorrow afternoon?"

Shikaku looked at him in real surprise. "You serious?" Shikamaru nodded. "All right, which jutsu were you wanting to learn?"

"All of them, and I want you to teach me anything else you think I should learn."

Shikaku stared. "You do realize that'll take awhile?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "I need to learn everything I can if I'm going to be a Jonin."

His mother turned around to look at him. "Jonin?"

He nodded. "I've already put in the request with the Hokage to take the Jonin exam."

His parents shared a conspiratorial smile. "Say son," Shikaku asked. "How is that girlfriend of yours?"

"She's just fine."

Shikaku raised an eyebrow. "You did hear what I asked right?" Shikamaru gave him a bored look. "The last time I called her that you denied she was any such thing."

Shikamaru leaned back into the chair and smiled. "Well that was before I gave her my heart."

Both his parents shouted the same thing at once. " **What?!** " His mom joined them at the table. "Tell us everything!" Yoshino insisted.

Smiling Shikamaru did exactly that. He told them about meeting her upon his arrival. About the dinner and about getting that first kiss. He told them what it was like to spend an entire evening dancing with her. He mentioned visiting her garden and playing shogi against her brother. He dropped the little matter of knowing Naruto was the Kyuubi's jailer. And yes he'd told Naruto, and yes they were still friends, and yes he knew about the law and would keep it secret. He told them about being punched by Senya and about later fighting him

to the death. And by the way he hadn't told the Hokage so they couldn't tell anyone about that. He mentioned Temari ending things and his going to see her to unend them. He related how he had offered her his heart and she had accepted. He then added the fact that they had been betrothed and that she was now officially, but secretly, his fiancé and oh by the way that was a secret too.

"So I kissed her one last time and left. That about covers everything." His parents were both just staring at him with open mouths. "What?"

"Temari what are you doing?"

She slowly opened her eyes. She covered her mouth and yawned. "What does it look like? I was taking a nap."

"A nap?" Kankuro asked.

She sat up and nodded. "Naps are always good."

Kankuro shook his head. "Listen there's something I wanted to ask you."

She smiled. "Laureen, Akuri Laureen, that's who I am setting you up with."

Kankuro started. He had to think for a moment. "Oh of course! I remember her now. She's a puppeteer; we used to play together when we were kids. She doesn't have the ability to mold chakra though, she's simply an entertainer. I haven't seen her in a couple years; I didn't even realize she was on my list. Why her?"

"Because she's a good girl from a good solid family who would be a good wife for you. And most importantly of all, for some reason I can't fathom, she actually *likes* you."

He thought about it. "Well I always liked her and I always thought she was kind of cute, but I don't know."

"Just give her a chance. Give her three real dates and see how it goes."

Kankuro shrugged. "Well I suppose it won't hurt. But that's not what I was wanting to ask you about."

"Oh?"

He looked a bit embarrassed. "Temari, can I see your garden?"

She looked at him suspiciously. "Why do you want to see it?"

"Because you've let Gaara, Baki, and Shikamaru see it and I really want to see it too."

She considered it for a moment. "All right, you can see it."

He smiled at his big sister. "Really?"

She nodded. "But I swear, if you step on one flower I am kicking your ass!"

It was almost noon and there was a small crowd gathered on the steps of the Hokage Tower. Looking around Shikamaru was surprised at the turnout. All of the Konoha eleven were here as well as their senseis. The Hokage and Shizune were also here and so was his dad. He noticed that Hinata was speaking excitedly to Kurenai who was listening with a smile on her lips. It looked like Naruto's first date had gone pretty well; hopefully he would manage not to screw things up. He spotted someone he wanted to talk to and went over to her.

"Hey Sakura."

She nodded to him. "Hey Shikamaru, so what is going to happen?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "Nothing much Naruto is just going to pay off a bet he made with me. How did you hear about it though? I mentioned something to Hinata, but the only other people I told were my folks, Asuma, Chouji, and Ino."

"Oh Ino pig told me and I'm pretty sure she told Tenten. I mentioned it to Lady Tsunade. I don't know about everyone else though."

Shikamaru shook his head. Well, he'd told Ino, he should just be glad half the village wasn't here. "Listen Sakura I was wondering if I could ask you a favor."

"What?"

"Listen, would you mind teaching me and my team some basic medical jutsus?"

She looked at him. "Really? What did you have in mind? I'm not really proficient yet."

"Well none of us are medic nins but I was thinking that if there were a jutsu that would stop a cut from bleeding, it might be really useful in combat."

Sakura nodded. "I could teach you that." She suddenly took on an evil smile and looked in the direction where his blonde teammate was. "I don't know how eager Ino will be to have me teach her though."

"I've spoken about this with Asuma and he agrees it's a good idea. So don't worry about Ino, she'll follow Asuma's order."

Sakura laughed. "Oh! I am going to enjoy being Ino pig's sempai."

Shikamaru returned to his original spot where his dad and Asuma were talking.

"Shikamaru, your dad tells me you're applying for the Jonin exam." Asuma said, cigarette as always in his mouth.

"That's right."

"Any particular reason why you're suddenly so motivated?"

"Yes, she lives in Suna and carries a fan on her back."

Asuma gave him a smile and seemed to take a quick peek in the general direction of Hinata and Kurenai. "You know I'm sorry I missed this mission. I want you to tell me all about it when we get together for lunch."

"I'm afraid I won't be able to tell you everything, but I do have a lot to share."

"Is that Naruto?" They heard Kakashi say.

Conversations suddenly ground to a halt as they all saw the blonde coming down the street. At the sight of him stomping towards them the temporary silence was suddenly replaced by howls of laughter and people asking questions and making comments. Most eyes were on Naruto but a few were sent his way. He noticed Ino and Chouji grinning and giving him thumbs up.

"Shikamaru," Asuma was barely able to keep the laughter out of his voice. "Just what did you do?"

He gave his sensei a little grin. "Oh, I made him a bet that Hinata would go out on a date with him if he asked her."

Asuma laughed. "Sucker bet."

"Best kind."

Naruto walked up the steps and came to a halt in front of all of them. For the first time any of them could remember he did not have a scrap of orange anywhere on him. He wore baggy brown pants, a grey jacket over a black fishnet shirt, and his head band was tied around his left arm. His blonde hair had been corralled and put into a

top knot. A surprising number of cameras, including Shikamaru's of course, began snapping pictures.

Naruto cleared his throat and spoke out loud. "I Uzumaki Naruto, future Rokudaime Hokage hereby proclaim that I will appoint Nara Shikamaru as my Chief Advisor and always listen to his advice. I also proclaim that Shikamaru has the world's hottest girlfriend and that I am his personal bitch."

Most eyes turned from Naruto to him. Shikamaru smiled and he thought about everything that had happened to him since the day he met a loud troublesome blonde girl at the finals of the Chunin exams. His life had been completely and radically changed. He had been through quite a number of troublesome situations and he was sure that there would be even more of them in the future. Then he thought about his Temari. What that first kiss had been like. What it felt like to kiss her and hold her in his arms. He thought about that special smile she gave him. He remembered what it had felt like when she had accepted his heart and when she'd said she'd be his wife someday. In his mind he balanced all the trouble and future trouble against the joy being with her had given him. There was only one obvious conclusion.

She is worth it.

THE END